Mapping Sense of Belonging in Library Spaces[1]

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In the decade that has passed since Megan Oakleaf, in The *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report,* identified the need for academic libraries to demonstrate how patron interactions in library spaces contribute to improved student success outcomes,[2] a key challenge has been to develop ways to accomplish this goal. Increasingly, in the intervening time, critical issues of historical and ongoing inequities in academic libraries have come to inform how libraries approach space assessment.[3] In this paper, I suggest that mapping student sense of belonging (SB), which has been correlated to student academic success and associated with improved outcomes for students in minoritized communities,[4] to library spaces, is a way to situate where and how physical spaces support the success of students in the diverse communities libraries serve. Presenting findings from on an ongoing dissertation research project employing this approach, this paper provides procedures that academic libraries may use to assess physical spaces and findings connecting library spaces to student SB.

Library Sites and Participants

The two sites for the study are the main libraries at a large multicampus urban community college and at a large urban research university in the American Southwest, which I am calling Southwestern Community College (SWCC) and Southwestern University (SWU). As highly diverse institutions, both designated as Minority Serving Institutions (MSI), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISI), student participants provide emic perspectives on the experiences of members of minoritized student communities in academic library spaces. Moreover, these sites may add to our knowledge of how differences in student demographics and resource disparities between community colleges and universities affect student experiences in library spaces.[5]

Due to the sites' physical closures for five months during the COVID-19 crisis, student participant recruitment was delayed until August 2020. Recruitment began with posted flyers, expanding to asking faculty members to identify interested students, working with library staff to recruit student workers, and, at one site, using an email-delivered announcement system and, at the other, posting notices on library tables and desks. Due to the focus of the study being undergraduate student experiences, one participation criterion was undergraduate status. A second was site library usage at least once a week any semester fall 2019 or before. This criterion was added to ensure participants had the opportunity to develop SB in the physical library during a typical (i.e., pre-pandemic) semester. The third was being a legal adult, 18 years old or older. A total of 28 students have been interviewed, 11 from SWU and 17 from SWCC. The data from the demographic survey are presented in Table 1. In many metrics, though notably not sexual orientations and gender identities, the diversity of participants reflects the enrollment at the two institutions. All participants were given a $20 gift card.

Table 1: Participant Attributes (n=28)

Attribute		Number of Participants
Institution	SWCC	17
	SWU	11
Credits completed	6–29	6
	30–59	11

Attribute		Number of Participants
	60–89	7
	90–119	0
	120+	4
Credits fall 2020	1–5	5
	6–11	6
	12 or more	17
Library usage fall 2019 or before	1x/week–3x/week	13
	3x/week or more	9
	2+ times every day on campus	6
Age	18–24	17
	25–29	5
	30–39	4
	40–49	1
	50–59	1
1 or more children 17 or younger	No	23
	Yes	5
Either parent completed a college degree	No	21
	Yes	7
Race/ethnicity	Latinx	9
	White	6
	Asian/Asian American	4
	Black/African American	3
	Hawaiian/Pacific Islander & Asian/Asian American	2
	Latinx & White	1
	Asian/Asian American & White	1
	Black/African American & White	1
	Black/African American & Ethiopian	1
Best description of gender	Female	20
	Male	8
Identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or queer	No	27
	Yes	0
	Not sure/questioning	1
Have a physical or learning disability	No	25
	Yes, I have a learning disability	2
	Yes, I have a disability not listed: anxiety and sleep disorder	1

Observations and Photo-Elicitation Interviews

The primary data sources for this qualitative research study are observations and photo-elicitation interviews centered on participant photographs of library spaces.[6] It had been planned that the observations would occur before the interviews in order to situate SB-related activities at the sites, and would proceed in two stages: grand tour observations used to identify and describe places where students engage in SB-indicative activities[7] and seating sweeps of those places to locate specific experiences in relation to student demographics.[8] Due to the sites' five-month closures, prior to the observations the triangulation dataset, which did not require library physical access, was completed. For this reason and

bearing in mind that COVID-19 restrictions and reduced usage would change space usage dynamics, places indicated by the triangulation dataset were used for observations. Therefore, the observation protocols were combined so that grand tour notes were compiled simultaneously with seating sweeps. The triangulation dataset, consisting of publicly available and library administration-requested materials on library spaces and space assessment and 10 interviews with library staff, librarians, and administrators (five per site), was completed July 2020. The eight hours of observations were completed (four per site) September 2020.

Photo elicitation interviews, conducted from October through December 2020, brought together participant-generated visual content, semi-structured interviews, and experiential categories based on SB-related literature. Disrupting the power relationship between researcher and participant by centering the student as the expert on their experiences,[9] the interviews empowered students to define which spaces are meaningful to them, describe the significance of the photograph's framing and content,[10] and situate each image in the broader context of their college experience.[11]

Seven experiential categories provide the structure for the interview:[12] (1) place(s) in the library you like to go between classes or when you have extra time, place(s) in the library where you: (2) feel comfortable, (3) feel cared about, (4) feel supported, (5) feel at home, (6) can be yourself, and (7) your favorite place(s) in the library. Other than the first category, which serves as a warm-up and icebreaker, each category has been drawn from SB-related research, or student experiences in academic libraries and higher education. Specifically, Andrade associated feeling comfortable with socio-academic integration and belonging,[13] while Bodaghi, Cheong, and Zainab associated it with developing SB-connected relationships.[14] Feeling cared about has been associated with sense of community in academic environments by Cheng[15] and physical items provided to students in academic libraries by Neurohr and Bailey.[16] Maestas, Vaquera, and Zehr associated academic support with SB,[17] while Museus has linked SB to holistic support.[18] Being yourself, used in its plain meaning and as a proxy for authenticity, emerges from Vaccaro and Newman's research[19] as well as its role in particular student communities, as described by Samura,[20] Sulé,[21] and Tachine, Cabrera, and Yellow Bird.[22] Finally, feeling at home and favorite places are connected to spatial SB, the former described in the academic library context by Mehta and Cox,[23] and the latter in connection to place attachment theory by Scannell and Gifford.[24] The final section of the interview provides an opportunity for the participant to reflect on all their photographs and talk about themes that have emerged during the conversation.

Participants were asked to take five photographs, each representing one or more experiential category, omitting those not relevant to that student and allowing for photos to represent multiple categories. Altogether, 23 students took photographs (12 at SWU and 11 at SWCC). Of these, one did not schedule an interview. The initial research design did not anticipate that some students would not be coming to campus due to various COVID-19-related reasons. An alternative way to describe places in the library was provided to such students. Six SWCC students used this option, two prior to the SWCC site library being closed due to COVID-19 concerns mid-November, four after. Ten photographs were taken based on student descriptions prior to the closure. After the closure, participants' descriptions were matched to previously taken photographs. At SWU, though this alternative was available, it was not used. The total number of photographs is 121: 111 taken by participants, 10 by this writer based on descriptions.

As data has been collected, first with the triangulation dataset, then with observations and interviews, analysis has occurred simultaneously, using the constant comparative method.[25] Analytic memos have been used to record patterns and codes throughout the data collection process.[26] For most interviews, transcripts have been shared as part of member checking. However, due to time constraints, this has not yet occurred for all student participants. As part of member checking, participants have been given the opportunity to choose their pseudonyms. Due to time constraints, a full analysis of all the study data has

not been completed. Therefore, the findings presented below are preliminary, based on multiple close readings of the transcripts and ongoing data analysis.

Four Facets of Belonging

This study applies four approaches to SB: psychological, spatial, cultural, and sociocultural. These overlap, together providing a multifaceted understanding of belonging.

Psychological SB applies to the individual level, the student's experience feeling that they belong in a community. Hurtado and Carter, followed by many others, adapted it to higher education as a way to understand factors influencing minoritized students' persistence.[27] This study applies Strayhorn's definition that psychological SB is "a cognitive evaluation (i.e., 'I think these are my people') that typically leads to an affective response (i.e., consequently, one feels good) and oftentimes behavioral manifestations (i.e., does things like build personal connections or join clubs)."[28]

Spatial SB focuses on the physical dimension of belonging, the emotional and personal connections people make in and with specific places. Applicable to any space, from a carrel to the entire library, it is associated in this study with favorite places[29] and counterspaces.[30] This study applies Antonsich's definition of place belongingness as a space imbued with four characteristics: "familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment."[31]

Cultural SB refers to the ethos, practices, and policies of the institution, which influence student SB. It draws from Museus' Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model, which understands psychological SB as an academic achievement influence, two CECE indicators, "cultural familiarity" and "availability of holistic support."[32] This study applies Museus' definition of the former as "the extent to which college students have the opportunity to physically connect with faculty, staff, and peers with whom they share common backgrounds"[33] and the latter as "access to one or more faculty or staff members that [students] are confident will provide them with the information they seek, offer the help they require, or connect them with the information or support they need."[34]

Sociocultural belonging refers to engaging and aligning activities with and imagining futures connected to communities of practice (CoP).[35] Grounded in the concept of situated learning, described by Lave and Wenger as "learning [which] occurs through centripetal participation in the learning curriculum of the ambient community,"[36] new students may begin on the periphery, learning academic success techniques from established students and staff, then later become experts who teach by sharing their expertise or by being observed by novices. It may also apply to classmates learning from each other while studying together. In this study, CoP are understood as occurring on the macro level, throughout the library but especially in communal study contexts and at the micro level, in course/discipline-based groups.[37]

Equity and Belonging in Library Spaces

This study is informed by research on equity and SB in academic libraries, which suggests that library policies, campus climate, and interpersonal interactions are factors in developing SB. Studies of students in minoritized communities' academic library experiences offer a range of findings, from perceived exclusion or intimidation to feeling welcomed. On the former end are student parents who face, as Keyes describes, policies that either ignore their needs or actively dissuade them from bringing children to the library.[38] The research of Seale, Draffan, and Wald,[39] and Samson,[40] suggests that students with disabilities may experience ghettoization when using assistive technology. Inadequate cultural familiarity may dissuade Latinx and Native American students' usage of academic libraries. Specific issues include Eurocentric monumental structures and aesthetics,[41] impersonal atmospheres, staff without cultural affinity, and a dearth of community-tailored resources.[42] A Native American student in Neurohr and Bailey's study reflects this experience, stating "When I think of a[n academic] library I think of

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something very institutional and educational, something that can be a bit intimidating especially for someone of a minority. You think, 'Oh well, I don't really belong here.'"[43]

Recent studies by Andrade[44] and Stewart, Ju, and Kendrick,[45] however, suggest that many Latinx and African American students feel comfortable or welcomed in academic libraries in specific situations. A contributing factor in Andrade's study for Latinx students is the cultural familiarity and support afforded by housed or adjacent Latinx student centers. Stewart et al. suggest that though African American students generally feel welcomed, this is inversely correlated to perceived campus racism. The experience of feeling welcomed aligns with several studies, including Whitmire's finding that African American students form counterspaces in academic libraries.[46]

The handful of academic library student SB studies focus on the influence of interpersonal factors. Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, and Newman describe a student with a disability who experienced SB when studying in the library because she was "being seen as a legitimate student."[47] Their experience suggests that communal study may contribute to SB. Bodaghi et al. describe the role of librarians' caring demeanor for visually impaired Malaysian students developing SB. One student stated, "We need a friendly, empathic librarian who would greet us with a 'hi' or 'salam' [peace]…Once we feel more comfortable with the librarians, we could talk to them."[48] Broughton suggests that interpersonal factors, including identity and academic commonalities, influence preferred study spaces, which become SB sites, and that micro-belonging in these spaces may precede institutional-level SB.[49]

Preliminary Findings

The thick descriptions presented and contextualized below suggest an emergent mapping of SB to library spaces. Common elements in photo elicitation interviews indicate that specific types of academic library places support developing certain types of SB in particular students communities. However, while connections to particular types of SB are noted below, SB types do not have clear borders, with multiple possible interpretations of these student quotes, photos, and the related experiences.

Psychological SB: I Made a Friend There Once

> Before COVID and stuff like that, you would go and sit there and you would do your work… I think that when I first started school I was intimidated to go talk to people and things like that. I think I made a friend once there. She was talking with me about school. She was around the same age as I was. I just felt comfortable and supported. We were just talking there…When I would be in that area I would see a lot of people studying, actually or just talking to people… It felt very kind of welcoming like a warm environment. Because it's kind of closed offish, I guess. So it felt relaxed.

Sandra, a traditional aged, first generation Latinx SWCC student describes her initial feeling that she may belong in the library community. The space in which this occurred, an earth-tone u-shaped couch with corner tables, built-in USB ports and outlets, and small portable laptop desks and ottomans facilitates students facing each other while having ample individual space. Her photograph is of the outside of this furniture unit, indicating the perspective she may have had before she overcame her fear of talking with other students (Figure 1). One factor that helped her overcome her initial feeling of intimidation was the cultural familiarity of the person she met and of the other students using the space.

Figure 1: Closed Offish Warm Environment

Spatial SB-Counterspace: I Know Where You're at

> Home for me is where I can be comfortable with the people I'm with, where I feel safe
> and I can be who I am, because when I go to class, after that, I'm not saying I'm
> different, but my way of thinking and stuff is not the same as my home…Fifth floor is
> like at home, because my friends are in there and we all came from the same place, and
> we all go through the same stuff…I think that it's mostly the people I surround myself
> with makes it at home and the place that I'm in…They don't need to ask sometimes and I
> just say, "I'm in the library," and they say, "Okay, I know where you're at."

Camila, a Pacific Islander and Asian multiracial SWU student, describes her spatial belonging in a counterspace. Many SWU participants, especially Latinx or Pacific Islanders, described the fifth floor as reminding them of home environments due to its ambient background sound and tolerance of socializing while studying. An environment used by many groups, a large skylight and window views add to its appeal (Figure 2). In Camila's case, as an outsider coping with the challenges of being very far from home spatially and culturally, this place, where she connects with and draws strength from her identity group, has become her home as an SWU student.

Figure 2: Like at Home

Spatial belonging can also occur in quiet spaces and alone. Alexa, a traditional aged, multiracial, Latinx and White SWCC student describes her favorite cubby (i.e., carrel): "Yeah, like really rough times in that

cubby…At the beginning I was really struggling… I was just studying the wrong way… I definitely feel like that spot specifically allowed me to have a lot of personal growth, realize what works for me and what doesn't." Many students, especially student parents and others who need to eliminate distractions, seek out high sided carrels for privacy and quiet. For some, using the carrels with desktop PCs is a necessity because they do not have their own computers. In this study, it was predominantly SWCC students who preferred high-sided carrels, which may reflect socio-economic status differences between the student populations at the sites (Figure 3).[50]

Figure 3: A Place for Personal Growth

Cultural SB-Holistic Support: I Didn't Expect Her to Do That, So That's Why I Couldn't Forget It

> I didn't know how to bring my data from this to class…I worried and a lady was walking into that door… I said, "I just did my work, but I have to take it to my class. I don't know how to take it. Can you show me how I can put it in my drive?" She said, "I have a flash drive for you"… I couldn't forget it, because normally this is my own thing that I have to deal… I didn't expect her to do that, so that's why I couldn't forget it… that left an impression for me.

> When it comes to supporting, that first desk, the reception desk…they always, of course, will support you...like if I am having trouble with a computer or something…but when it comes to care, she really cares…Because if somebody was mean, you will have a whole impression about the library…Those small experiences which add up, like there's no SWCC. It's abstract…but those daily experiences will change your impression for the good or for the worst.

Mariam, an African American and East African SWCC student in her 40s with two children and a full-time job, uses the library for "serious study." Her interactions with library staff are generally limited to technology-related help. Like many SWCC students, she calls the actions of a librarian caring, while describing the assistance received at the circulation desk, supportive. In relation to holistic support, the experience of feeling cared about personalizes mundane transactions, making a difference in students' campus experience.

Ariana, a White student in her late twenties, locates this experience of caring, as did many other SWCC students, at the reference desk, stating, "I feel like they cared about me, because …they really actually want to help you…and they're genuinely nice people." The centrality of the reference desk, adjoining a

computer lab area, facilitates students asking printing and technology-related questions. While for some that is the extent of their interactions, for others, these technical issues reduce barriers to more substantive interactions, enabling the librarian to become a go-to person for support.

Figure 4: She Really Cares

Cultural SB-Cultural Familiarity: We Were on This Same Playing Field

> I think the first time I went I didn't know anybody but then I kept seeing this one older woman and she had like her…student helpers. So I personally felt a little bit more comfortable with the students, even though the more older person, it was fine the first time, but I didn't feel like my questions were dumb if I was asking students. Like we were on this same playing field. You were a freshman beforehand and I'm a freshman now. Can you help me out? What are your tips? With the other person who was helping me out. Cool. You're helping me out, like super nice, so I felt like if I had a more common question that we should all know, like I didn't feel as stupid if I asked a student…They gave me more of an inside scoop, more of like a college cheat sheet than if I had asked someone who wasn't necessarily a student there, more just who worked at the library.

Liliana, a first generation, traditional aged, Latinx SWU student, describes her preference for getting assistance from students; a sentiment voiced by many SWU students. Unlike at SWCC, many SWU students view librarians and library staff as specialists from whom they rarely seek assistance.

This type of cultural familiarity is also a key part of SB for Frank, a traditional aged, first generation Latinx SWU student. All of the people he describes as contributing to his SB are students. He reflects, "I feel like I belong as a SWU student here, because… the people that come with you or the people that you're studying with or the tutors who are there, who are supporting you, are part of what makes SWU what it is…that make you feel like more of a SWU student." Interacting with students in a library housed tutoring center and getting assistance from student workers at circulation and technology help desks, symbolize the role of the library as supporting and caring about them for Frank and other SWU students (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Tutors Support You

Sociocultural Belonging-Group Study CoP: That's Where We're Going

> I go there with people who want to know and learn as much as I do, that care about the class, care about their future, so they come here. We collaborate and I feel like that's what SWU is about, different people coming together to learn and grow, so that's what I do when I'm there…Because that's where we're going to do eventually in life, right, in our careers. We're going to have to collaborate with others, especially in the medical field…So when I go there and I'm with a future med student, a future physical therapy student, a future nurse, I know that that's what I'm going to do when I get older too, hopefully, so it's nice practice.

Sierra, a traditional aged first generation Latinx SWU student describes belonging in an academic discipline/career focused CoP in a library space designed to facilitate collaboration (Figure 6). This area, away from foot traffic, but close to the entrance, has L shaped seating with corner tables, USB ports, outlets, and laptop desks. It faces, on two sides, large whiteboards. Belonging in a CoP includes imagination, in this case imaging how these collaborations relate to her future career.

Figure 6: Together to Learn and Grow

Other students, such as Alexa, describe similar experiences in group study rooms, "I feel like if I ever had any questions someone in my group would definitely know or could help me out…We were all kind of like a team… in this room I was definitely feeling support of my fellow classmates…We could have a place to actually be there for each other and help each other."

As many participants from both sites describe, group study rooms' whiteboards, technological capabilities, and the ability to speak freely make them key locations for course and discipline-based CoP (Figure 7).

Figure 7: A Place to Be There for Each Other

Sociocultural Belonging-Communal Study CoP: This Unspoken Drive to Do More

> I kind of feel like the people who go to the library are just a little bit more serious about their school, at least for that moment, or at least for whatever class they're in. They clearly care to some extent, which is why they're doing their work… I'm a senior this year… there's never been a question of if I'll finish my undergrad, but it's reaching that next level where sometimes it just feels like these classes are so hard…I definitely think that just being around other people in the library where I know that they are also working towards finishing their school… there's this unspoken drive to do more.

Emma, a traditional aged, multiracial Asian American and White student parent describes how seeing other students study in a reading room-type setting motivates and supports her (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Unspoken Drive to Do More

Isaac, a first generation African American SWCC student in his late twenties, did not come into higher education with Emma's confidence that he would be a successful student. He uses the library to develop a set of skills he associates with both academic and career success. He states, "I don't have some of the characteristics of people who are successful in their career… I'm using SWCC as part of my reprogramming…[The SWCC Library]'s one of the only places on campus that I can think of that could model the type of environment I plan to work in." The academic library may serve this role especially for first generation students who use the library as a model for being successful in higher education.

Discussion: Whatever Kind of Learning Environment You Need

What becomes evident listening to students describe their experiences and viewing their photographs with them is that an academic library has become a place where they feel comfortable, where they belong. It has helped them, in many ways, to persist in their higher education journey. These connections between their stories and specific library spaces and SB types may serve as preliminary recommendations for developing SB-supporting academic library spaces in your local contexts.

Psychological SB

Spaces where students can meet each other in a non-threatening way help students find their community in the library. Sandra's description of the role of a welcoming seating area which facilitates conversation is an example of a space reducing the intimidation that minoritized and first-generation students may experience when they first use an academic library. Another important location, for several students, is the circulation desk. They recall friendly, culturally familiar student workers who warmly welcomed them, gave them useful "tips" and offered free materials.

Spatial SB

Participants described developing personal and emotional connections to three types of places: (1) Social learning spaces with large tables accommodating groups comfortably become the library home for identity-based communities and in some cases become counterspaces; (2) the high-sided carrels with desktop computers where students engage in "serious study"; and (3) group study rooms, where classmates who study together become friends; where identity-based groups study together, socialize, and make a space for their community. It should be noted that windows feature prominently as restorative places in many students' experiences, but did not generally meet the criteria for spatial SB.[51]

Cultural SB

Participants describe the role of cultural familiarity and holistic support for their SB. Specifically, in relation to cultural support, seeing students (and staff and librarians) from the same racial and ethnic backgrounds as the library insiders and experts, at service desks and tutoring centers, helps students see themselves as members of the library community. As for holistic support, librarians and library staff humanize students' library and higher education experience by doing more than the transactional, particularly through projecting care. Librarians who are visibly accessible to students through centrally located service desks may facilitate developing these connections, joining students in co-creating a library community that extends beyond the student community.

Sociocultural Belonging

Spaces designed for collaboration, with access to the technology students may need, are places where micro-level CoP flourish. These may be in open, social learning environments or group study rooms. Participants from varying backgrounds indicate that they benefit from and use these spaces. Communal study areas, from traditional reading rooms to computer lab-type spaces, where students see each other, learn how to be successful students, and are motivated by each other, are essential library places for macro-level CoP.

Integrating the micro- and macro-level and inclusive of all the spaces discussed above, students experience the library as one encompassing community of practice that fosters SB in and through its variety of study and learning spaces. As Devin, a White SWU student in his late twenties states:

> I would say it's like a bunch of different realities you can create within the library based on where you choose to study. And so that ties into the overall, I feel like mission of SWU, which is diversity, which is whatever kind of learning environment you need to study in we'll give you those tools and support you, whether it be you need to be just completely left alone, in a very quiet area to learn or you need one-on-one tutoring, we can do that, too.

Endnotes

[1] This study, conducted as doctoral research for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas Higher Education doctoral program, was made possible by a fall 2019 Sabbatical Leave from the College of Southern Nevada and a 2019 ACRL Academic Library Impact Research Grant.

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