Sense of Belonging in the First Year of College

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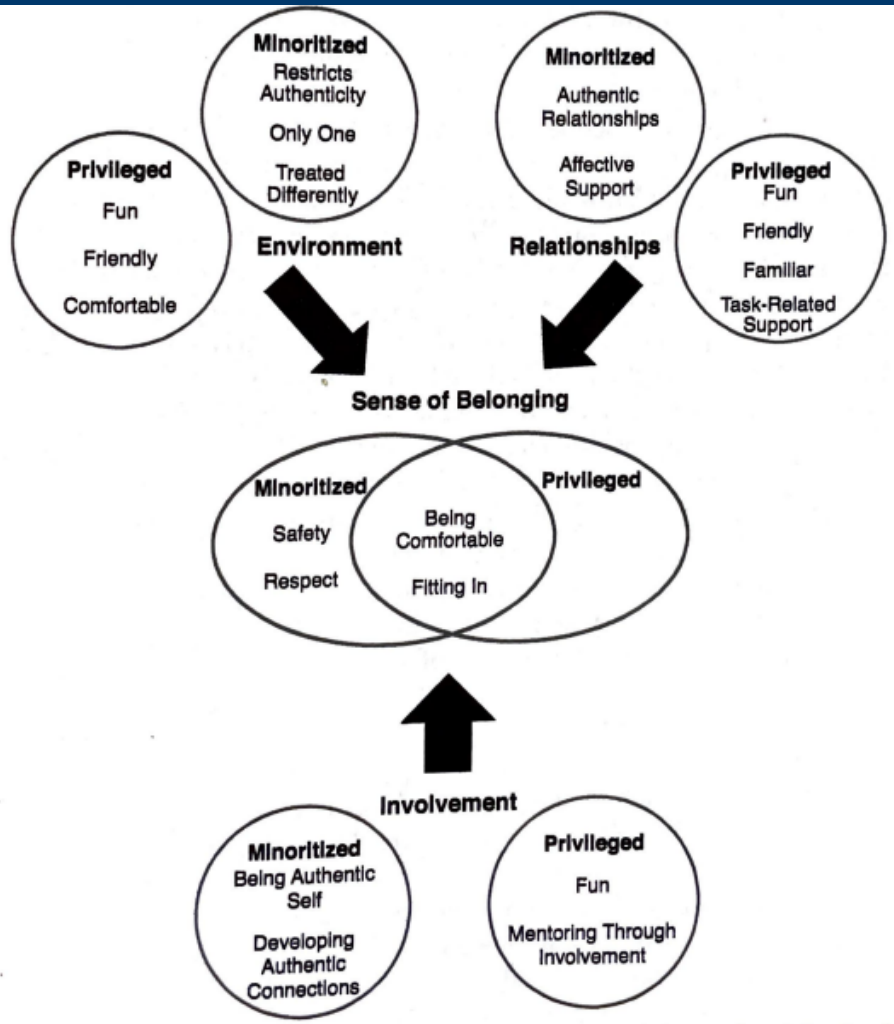
We will cover…

- Why Sense of Belonging is important
- BCSSE and NSSE Basics
- Purpose: To investigate the connection between entering first-year student expected academic expectations, beliefs, and prior experiences and their sense of belonging for students near the end of their first-year of college
- Strategies to increase sense of belongi

Sense of Belonging

What is sense of belonging?
"Students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 14).

- Rooted in basic human needs (Maslow, 1968)
- Inherently tied to our social identities (Vacarro & Newman, 2022)
- Related to concepts such as sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), connectedness and mattering (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981)



Vaccaro, A., & Newman, B. M. (2016). The development of a sense of belonging for privileged and minoritized students: An emerging model. *Journal of College Student Development, 57*(8), 925–942.

Why Sense of Belonging is important

Relationships have been found between sense of belonging and:

- Increased persistence and ongoing decision to pursue higher education
- Forming healthy social groups
- Academic performance, as well as sustained academic engagement
- Positive psychological well-being
- Academic and social involvement (vice-versa)

(Hausmann et al., 2007; O'Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2019; Walton and Cohen, 2007; Hagerty et al., 1992; Goodenow, 1993)

Strayhorn (2019; 2022) also suggests that sense of belonging "takes on heightened importance":

- In certain contexts (such as entering a new community)
- At certain times (such as late adolescence)
- Among certain populations (especially those who perceive themselves as marginal to campus life)
- In the classroom (feeling supported and connected to faculty and peers)

Show of hands. . .

BCSSE Basics

Purpose: To measure prior academic and co-curricular experiences, as well as expectations and beliefs about participating in educationally purposeful activities during the upcoming academic year, for all **entering students including first-year, transfer, and older students who have little or no college experience**.

BCSSE results are used in many ways including:

- Academic advising
- Retention efforts and predictive analytics
- First-year program design and evaluation
- Faculty and staff development
- And more. . . .

BCSSE Survey

Common questions for all students regarding their *expectations* and *perceptions* for the coming year. These common content areas include:

- Academic Preparation
- Academic Perseverance
- Academic Difficulty
- Academic Help-Seeking
- Collaborative Learning
- Student-Faculty Interaction
- Hours Studying and Working
- Importance of Campus Support
- Expectation to Graduate from Current Institution
- Sources for paying for college
- First generation status
- Expectation to graduate
- Expected grades
- Friends also attending
- Choice of institution
- Race/ethnicity
- Other background information

Expectations are Important

Understanding student expectations is important!

- **Expectations and beliefs about the upcoming year guide decision making and where students focus their attention.**
- **Expectations that you should pay attention too depends on what questions you are trying to answer or what you are trying to accomplish.**

NSSE Basics

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

- Administered annually at hundreds of baccalaureate level institutions across the US and Canada.
- Since 2000, approximately 6.4 million first-year and senior students enrolled at more than 1,600 institutions have completed NSSE.

NSSE
national survey of
student engagement

NSSE Basics

NSSE collects data representing a breadth of student engagement behaviors, including 10 Engagement Indicators and 6 High Impact Practices.

Engagement Indicators

- Higher-Order Learning
- Reflective & Integrative Learning
- Learning Strategies
- Quantitative Reasoning
- Collaborative Learning
- Discussions w/Diverse Others
- Student-Faculty Interaction
- Effective Teaching Practices
- Quality of Interactions
- Supportive Environment

High Impact Practices

- Learning community
- Internship, co-op, etc
- Work w/faculty on research project
- Service Learning
- Study abroad
- Culminating senior experience

NSSE Sense of Belonging

Sense of Belonging

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Response options: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree

1. I feel comfortable being myself at this institution.
2. I feel valued by this institution.
3. I feel like part of the community at this institution.

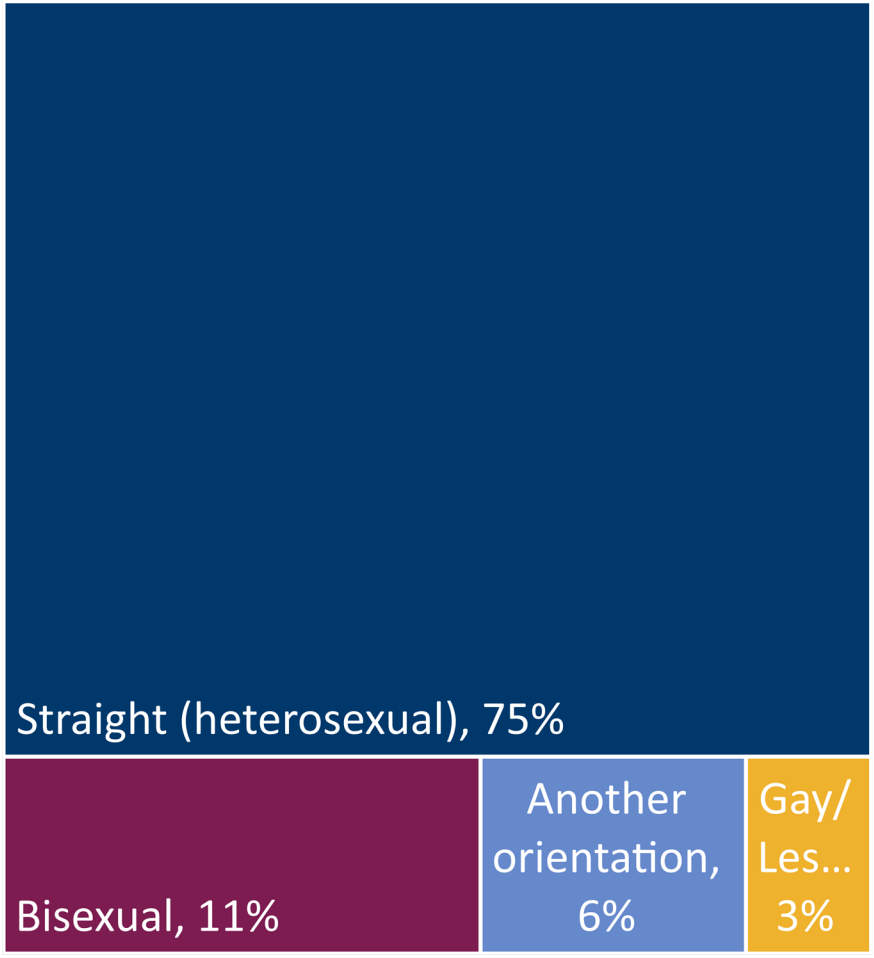
BCSSE and NSSE

FY student expected academic expectations, beliefs, and prior experiences

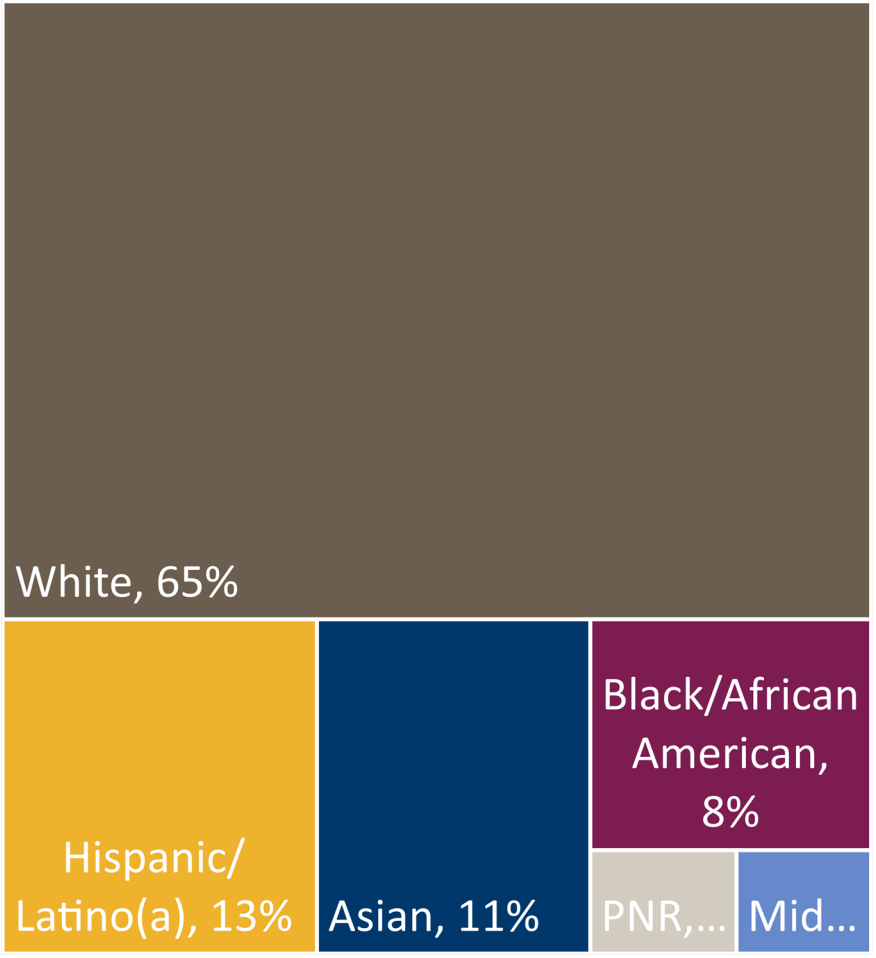
Sense of belonging for students near the end of their first-year of college

BCSSE-NSSE Sample

Sexual Orientation

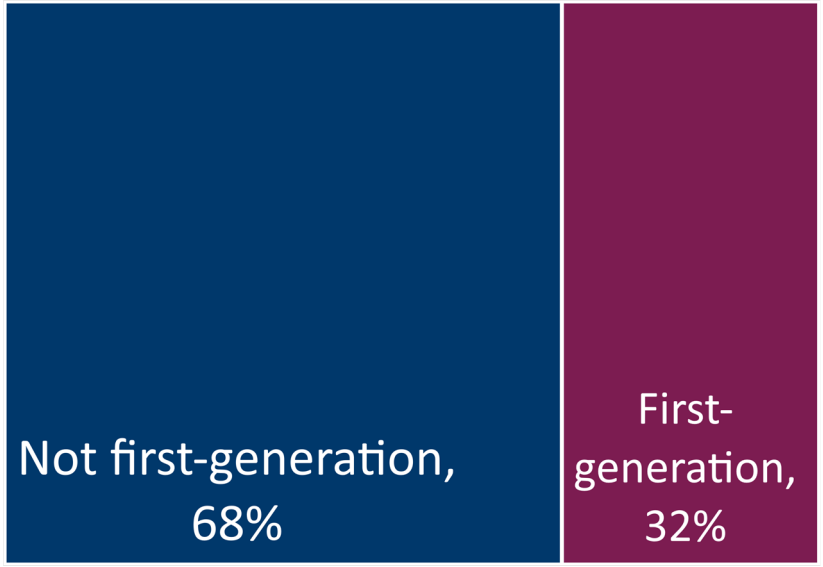


Race/Ethnicity

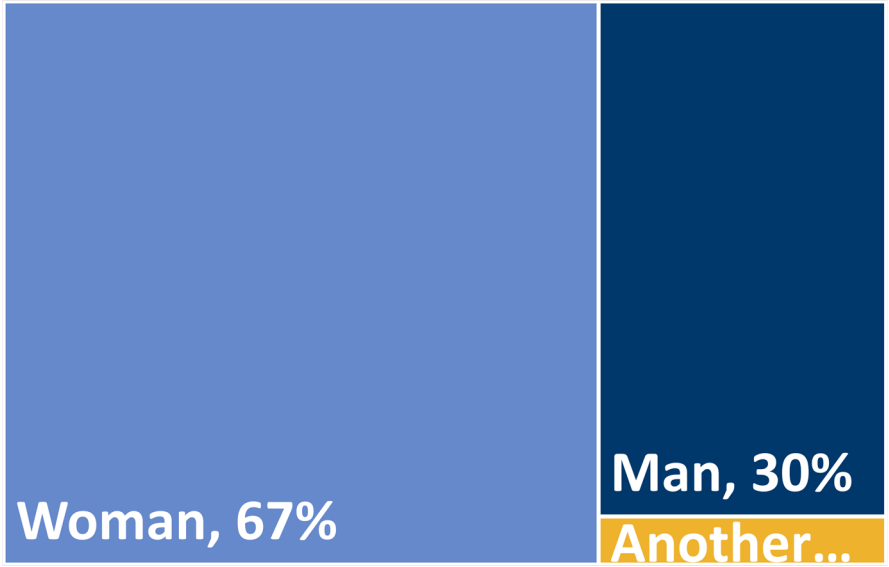


NSSE Sample

First Generation Status

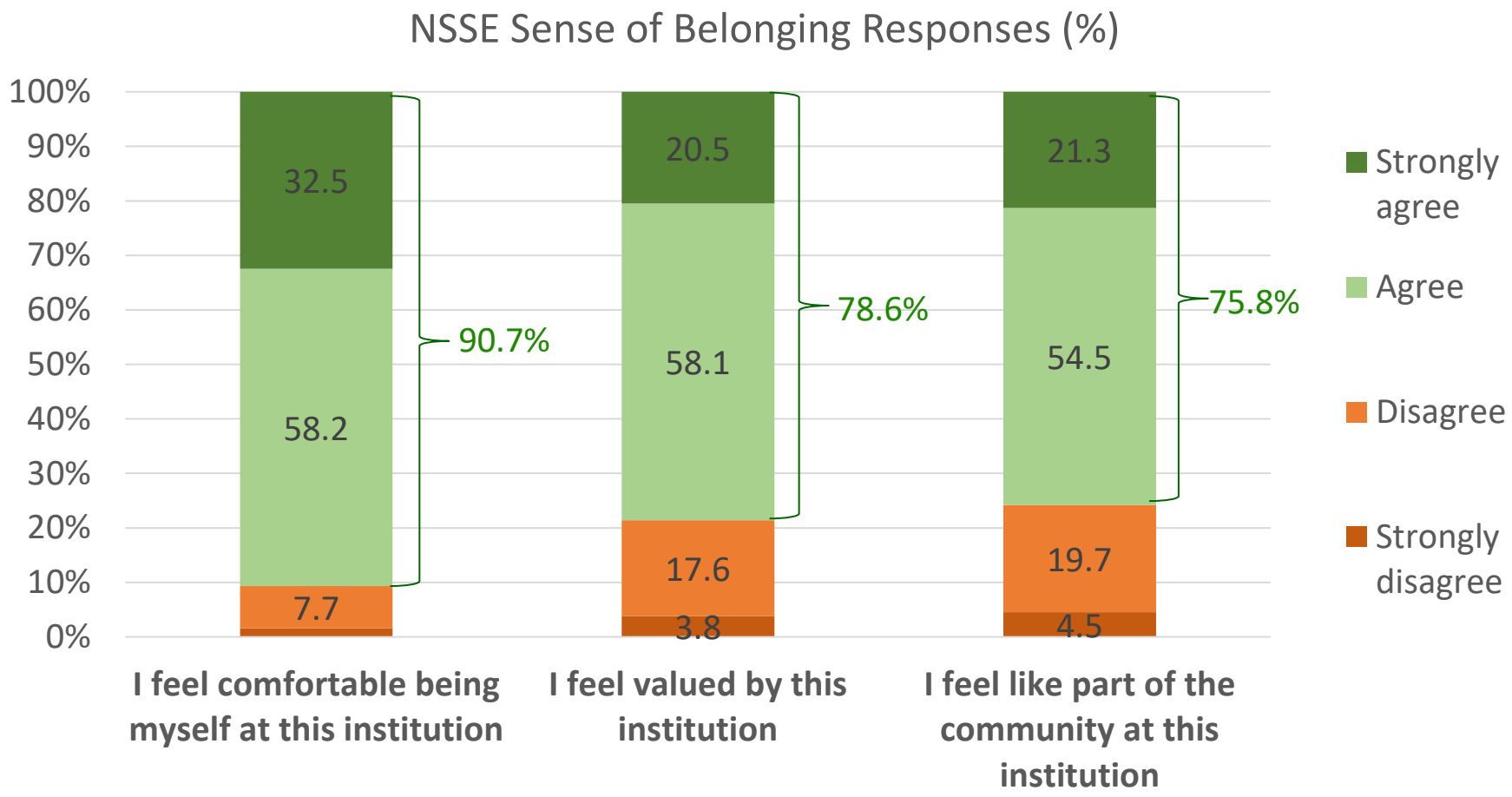


Gender Identity



Disability Status

FY Sense of Belonging



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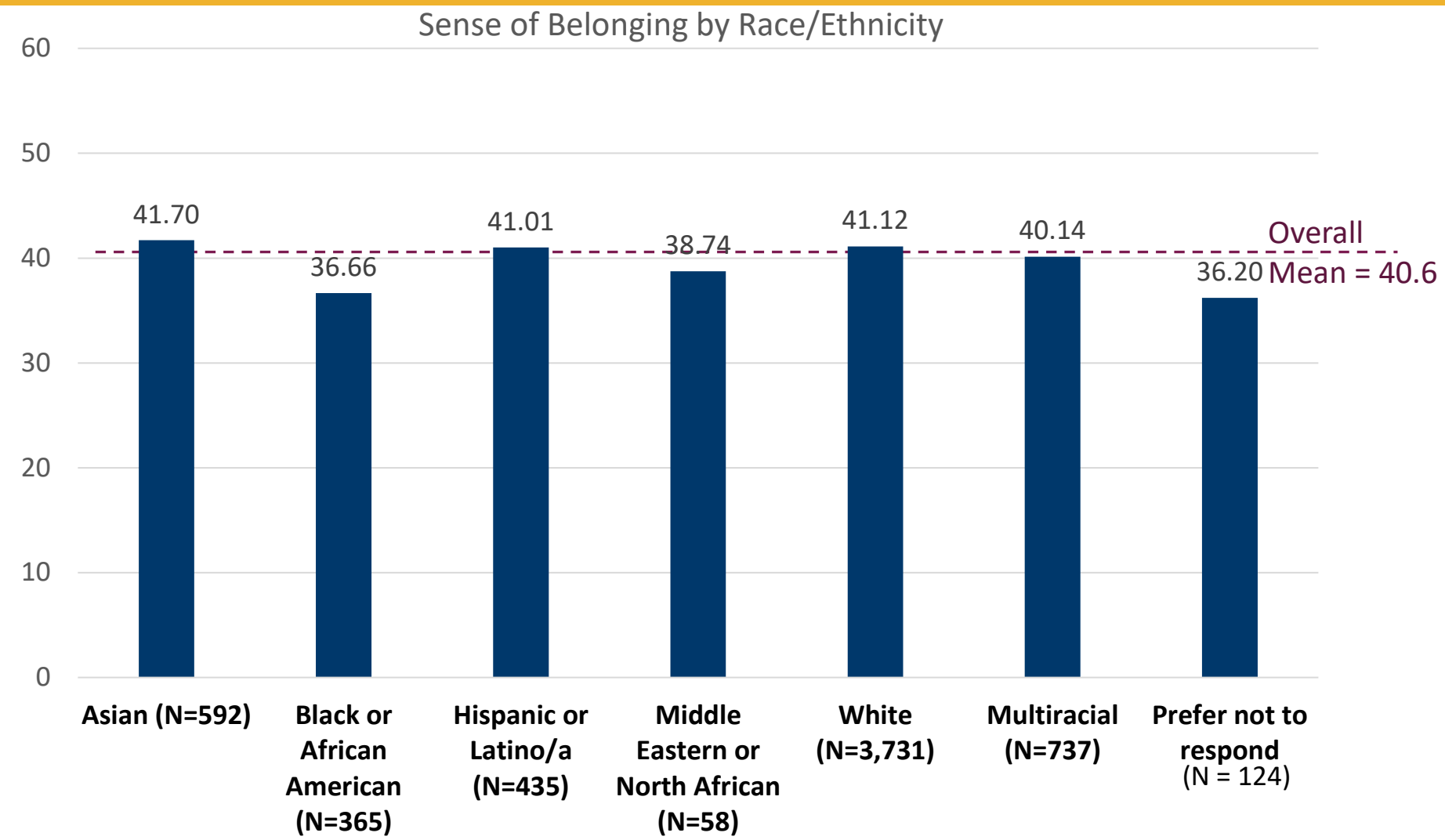

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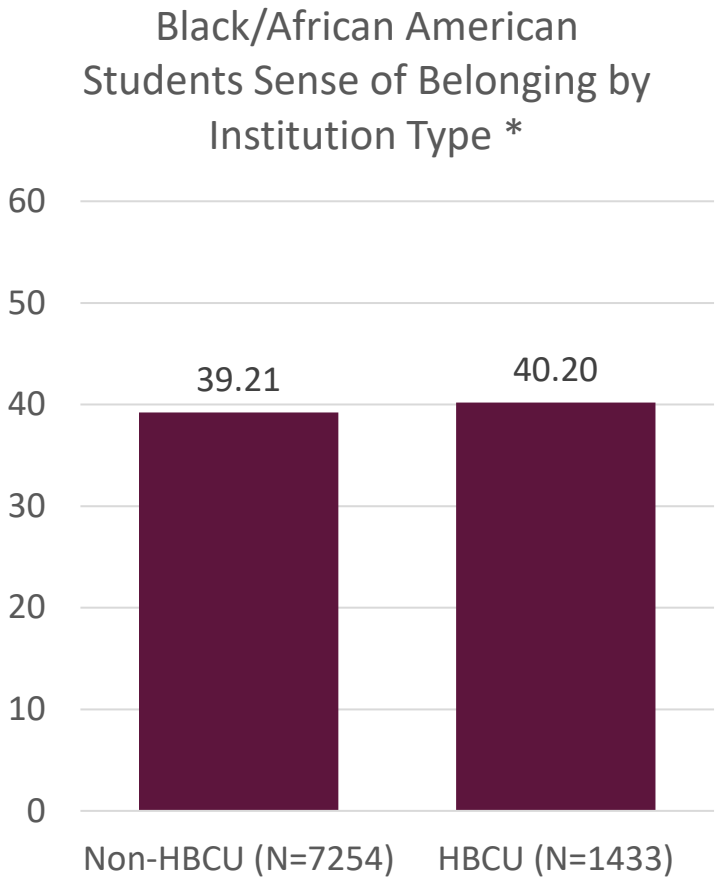
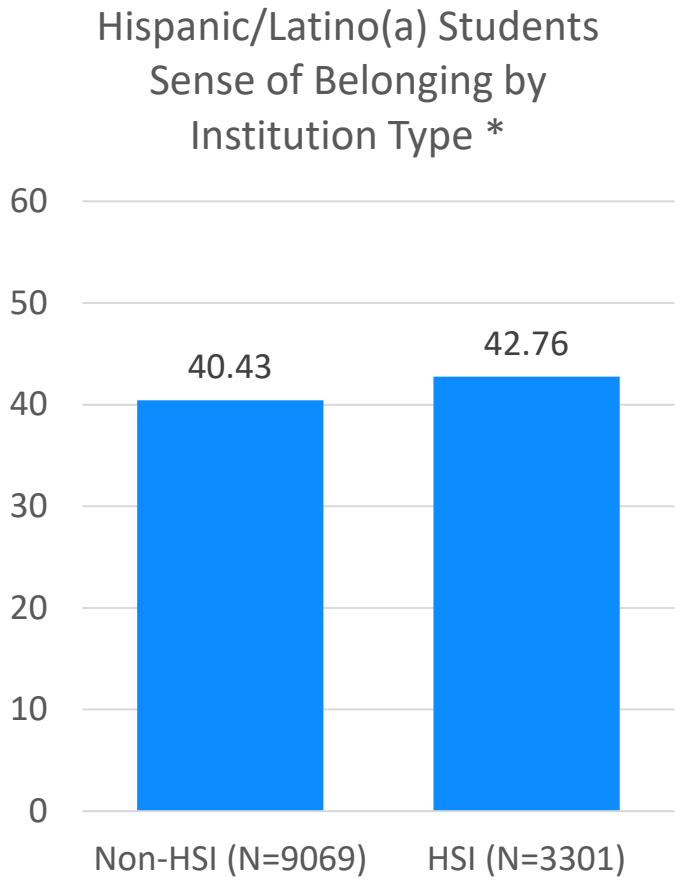
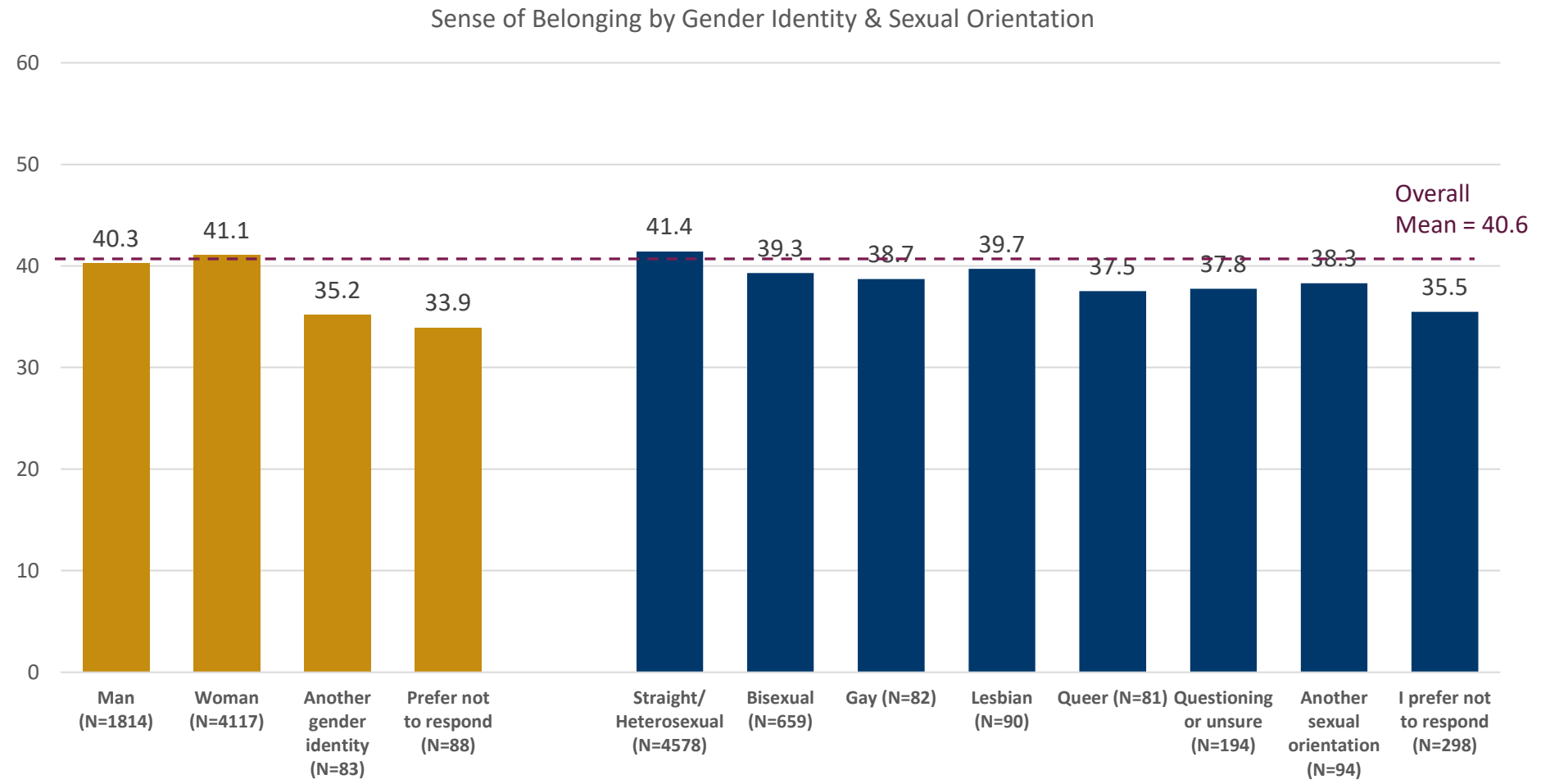




Independent samples T-tests reveal these to be significant differences, $p<.05$ for Black/African American Students and $p<.01$ for Hispanic/Latino(a)

*These data are from all First-Year NSSE Respondents

FY Sense of Belonging



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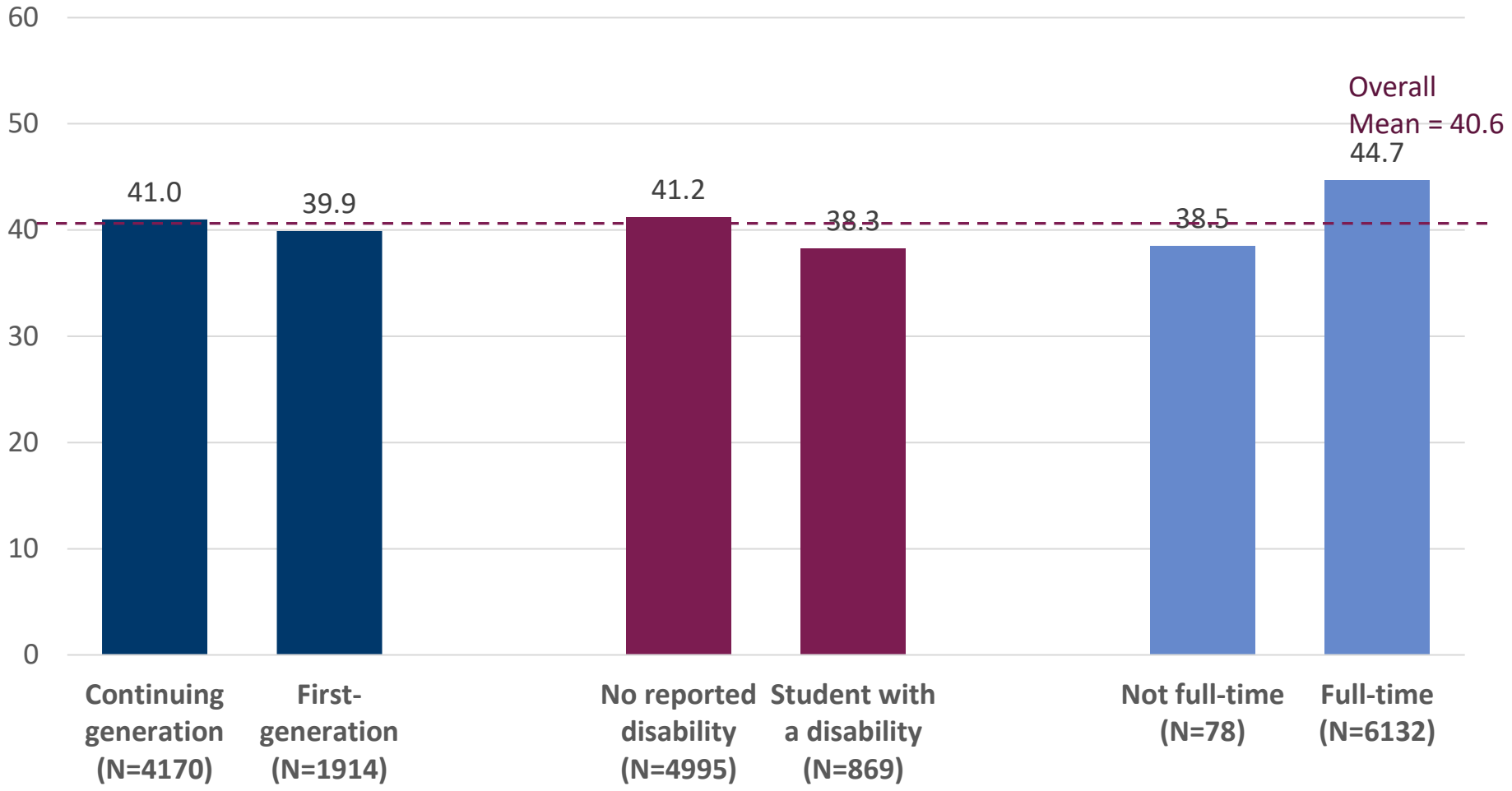

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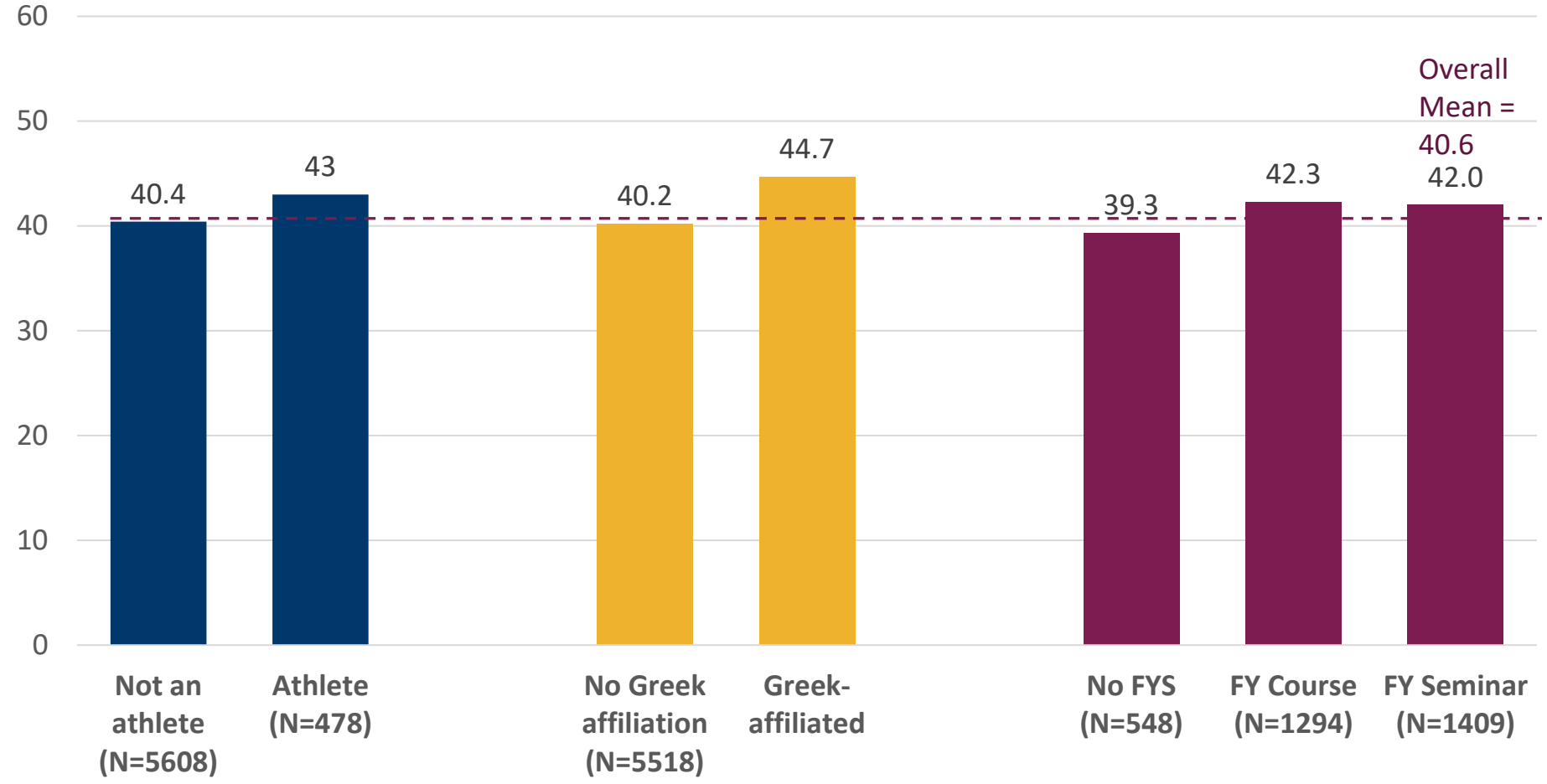
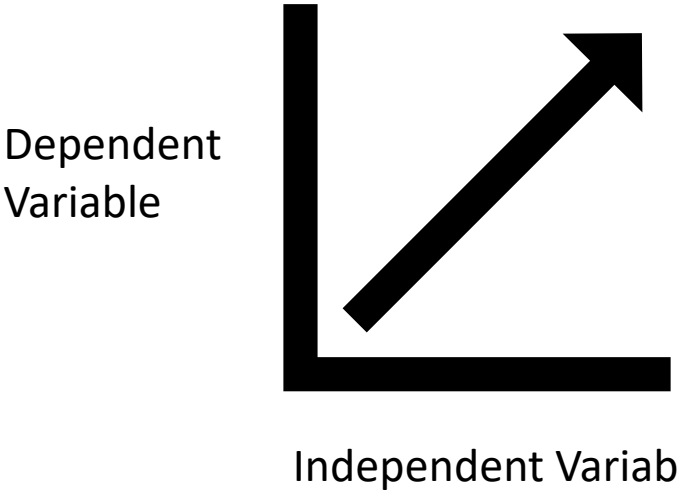
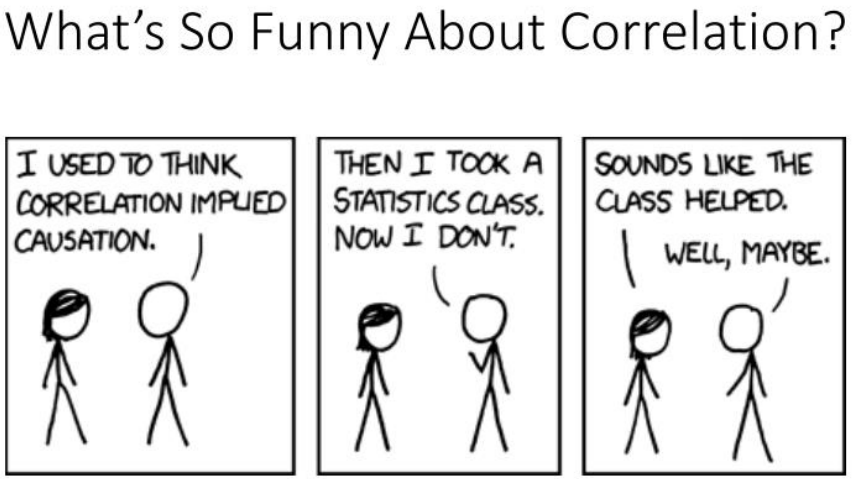


Sense of Belonging – Linear Regression

What is linear regression?
Linear regression is a modeling technique used to predict the relationship between two or more variables.
Linear regression fits a linear pattern to model changes in the dependent variable when a change takes place in the independent variable.





Connection between Expectations and Belonging

A regression analysis of 5,336 BCSSE-NSSE respondents indicated the following variables have a significant ($p<.05$) relationship with sense of belonging:

- Intend to graduate from this institution
- Anticipate asking other students for help with course material
- Certainty they will stay positive even when they do poorly on a test or assignment
- View a challenging academic experience as important when entering
- View institution providing opportunities to socialize as important when entering
- Anticipate participating in course discussions even when they don't feel like it
- Anticipate working more hours
- Anticipate difficulty managing time
- Anticipated difficulty in making friends
- Came to high school classes unprepared more frequently
- Anticipate difficulty paying for expenses
- Anticipated difficulty in getting help with schoolwork
- Institution not first choice

Strategies to increase sense of belonging

- FY Seminars/Courses & Orientation
- Assess involvement, attitudes/expectations, and engagement
  - Formal v. Informal
  - Collaborations
- Work with specific populations (First-gen, LGBTQ, students with a disability, etc.)
- Work collaboratively with academic affairs
- Incorporating the student perspective
- Examples from research:
  - Strayhorn (2021) – introduced a brief video of upper-class students discussing their experiences in finding belonging
  - Costello et al. (2022) – 9 group sessions based on The Teen Connection Project

What do you do on your campus that you feel contributes to students' belonging?
(Practices, interventions, traditions, etc.)

THANK YOU!

Please contact us with any questions or comments.

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