Building Belonging: The Impact of Physical Space on Student Sense of Belonging in Student Leadership, Involvement, and Changemaking at the University of San Diego

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Building Belonging: The Impact of Physical Space on Student Sense of Belonging in Student Leadership, Involvement, and Changemaking at the University of San Diego

Madeline Kreig

University of San Diego
Executive Summary

The purpose of this research is to understand how the structure of the Student Leadership, Involvement, and Changemaking (SLIC) space influences students’ sense of belonging. This study uses Mills’ (2000) Dialectic Action Research Spiral in conjunction with surveys, interviews, and focus groups to explore the questions: How does the structure of the Student Leadership, Involvement, and Changemaking space influence undergraduate students’ sense of belonging? Also, how can I, as a student affairs practitioner, enhance students’ sense of belonging in the SLIC?

In the context of this study, sense of belonging refers to the extent that one feels accepted, respected, included, supported, at home, and at ease within a space. This research explores how the structure of the SLIC, including the location and positioning of furniture, work spaces, resources, and staff impact belonging.

Data was collected during three cycles which took place from September 2017 to March 2018. The first cycle is a survey which aims to understand student belonging at USD and in the SLIC. The survey gathers data on where students spend time on campus and why they are drawn to those places. The second cycle uses interviews and focus groups to investigate students’ perceptions of the SLIC. Questions explore what aspects of the space work well and which aspects can be improved. The third cycle uses a survey to gather feedback on how each area of the SLIC contributes to student belonging. Questions examine how features, such as lighting and temperature, impact students’ perceptions of the space. 92 undergraduate students participated in the study. Information collected produced qualitative and quantitative data.

The research shows that a majority of participants feel a moderate to strong sense of belonging in the SLIC. Many students reported feeling a sense of belonging because the space is
welcoming, it creates a sense of community, or because they hold a formal leadership role connected to an office in the space. Other students reported a lower sense of belonging because they do not have personal connections in the space or because they do not hold a leadership role.

Data gathered shows that many aspects of the SLIC are meeting placemaking objectives and that some aspects can be improved. A majority of participants indicated that the lighting, temperature, and furniture are comfortable. They noted that they like the open office concept and enjoy having staff in the open spaces. Students indicated that they feel the greatest sense of belonging in the Creative Zone and the courtyard. While students enjoy many aspects of the SLIC, they also indicated that the space can be confusing and difficult to navigate. In addition, the majority of participants indicated that they do not feel ownership over the space.

The study provides several suggestions for improving the SLIC to increase belonging. It recommends that the layout foster a sense of community. For example, tables and chairs should be arranged in square or clustered formations which promote peer interaction and collaboration. Next, the open office concept could be enhanced by removing cubicles and creating more open work places. This would make the space more welcoming for visitors. Beyond this, art should include pictures from various campus events and should highlight pictures of students. Including a diverse range of pictures would foster belonging for a larger group of students.

In addition, it would be helpful to increase signage in the SLIC and surrounding areas. Signs could be used to direct students to the floor and its various spaces, to welcome students, and to indicate open work areas. Beyond this, it would be helpful to extend the Creative Zone hours so more students can use the space. Finally, resources such as whiteboards, bean bag chairs, and charging stations could be added to make the space more comfortable and conducive to peer interaction. Any changes should be assessed to ensure they meet placemaking objectives.
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Building Belonging: The Impact of Physical Space on Student Sense of Belonging in Student Leadership, Involvement, and Changemaking at the University of San Diego

Introduction

To belong is to experience, “being at home in the broadest sense of the phrase” (Block, p. xii). Creating an atmosphere where students feel accepted and at home is vital to building strong campus communities, as students are able to flourish when they connect to campus spaces. This research examines how physical spaces contribute to student belonging and makes recommendations for changing aspects of the Student Leadership, Involvement, and Changemaking (SLIC) space in order to increase students’ sense of belonging.

One of my motivations as a student affairs practitioner is to create spaces where students feel comfortable and at ease. In my daily work, I strive to promote a sense of belonging by welcoming students into the SLIC and asking questions to get to know them beyond a transactional level. This relationship building helps students feel comfortable asking questions, seeking resources, and finding opportunities on campus. I feel a sense of accomplishment when students who were once hesitant to enter the SLIC become regulars in the space, as I can see them developing a community. At the same time, it dismays me when I see students leave the office because they are unsure how to access resources or interact within the space. Through my work, I hope to make the SLIC a more approachable office.

My desire to help students have positive interactions in the SLIC led me to consider how I can enhance their experience. When first approaching my action research project, I was tempted to examine ways that I could increase student belonging through my individual interactions. However, a discussion at a staff meeting about how spaces impact the student experience, led me to consider how I can enhance student belonging by adjusting the physical
components of the SLIC. Through my research, I offer perspective on how students perceive the SLIC and how the space influences their sense of belonging in the office and on campus. I also explore why some students choose to spend a majority of their time in the SLIC, while others are hesitant to use the space.

I utilize the information gathered to make recommendations for adjusting physical aspects of the SLIC. By adjusting the office, I strive to improve students’ experiences in the space. I hope this research will inspire changes that create a greater sense of belonging for the students who use the SLIC. Exploring this topic helped me develop as a practitioner and it changed how I view and interact with physical spaces on campus.

**Research Questions**

My research is guided by two main questions: How does the structure of the Student Leadership, Involvement, and Changemaking (SLIC) space influence undergraduate students’ sense of belonging? Also, how can I, as a student affairs practitioner, enhance students’ sense of belonging in the SLIC?

**Literature Review**

Students interact with space as a result of how the space is designed and arranged (Oblinger, 2006). When students enter a room, they form an impression of the space that initially tells them how to interact in the environment (Leijon, 2016). For example, students who enter a fixed classroom with chairs facing the front of the room and an area designated for a professor are cued that the space is a lecture hall. This initial impression prompts students to adjust their expectations for the class and to behave in a specific way. I use this finding as a basis to predict that students are cued by the SLIC space, just as they are cued by the classroom in Leijon’s
Through my research, I explore the behavioral cues that students receive from the SLIC and how these signals impact their use of the space.

In addition to understanding how the SLIC influences student behavior, I also explore how the space impacts students’ emotional responses. When students enter a space their initial impression solicits an emotional response (Graetz & Goliber, 2002). Peoples’ desire to spend time in a setting is determined by this response (Graetz et al., 2002). People naturally seek to spend time in places where they feel familiar, comfortable, authentic, and at home (Cuba & Hummon, 1993). These feelings are influenced by the space’s coherence – how easily the space can be interpreted, complexity – the ability of the space to spark interest, legibility – perceived ease of use, and mystery – the notion that entering the environment will create increased learning or interest (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982). This research uses these elements as a guide to understand how the SLIC influences students’ emotional responses, so I can make changes that encourage students to feel at home within the office.

To offer a framework for examining and augmenting behavioral and emotional responses to the SLIC, this research focuses on placemaking. Placemaking refers to reimagining public places to create a connection between people and the space (Knight, 2016). Placemaking looks to connect people to the environment where they spend time and it encourages relationship building among those who frequent the same spaces (Pawlik-Kienlen, 2015). This creates a sense of belonging, which inspires people to return to the place. Pawlik-Kienlen (2015) find that great places are constantly evolving to meet the needs of their users. Through my research, I seek to become a placemaker. In becoming a placemaker, I strive to understand how the SLIC can evolve to foster a greater sense of community and belonging among the student population.
In addition to utilizing the concept of placemaking to frame my research, I draw upon research on third places and informal learning spaces in higher education. The concept of third places was created by Oldenberg and Brisset (1982) to describe places where people gather and spend time other than home, work, or the classroom. They find that third places create a sense of community by fostering relationships, providing a space of relaxation, and enriching public life. Matthews, Andrews, and Adams (2011) elaborate on this idea with their finding that informal learning spaces are third places that build community among students. Based on this research, I predict that the SLIC serves as an informal learning space for students and that it has the potential to build belonging for those who use it.

I also draw upon research on college unions, as the SLIC is located within the Student Life Pavilion, which serves as USD’s union. College unions are designed to bring campus constituents together, to support student learning, and to build community (Rodda & Rullman, 2011). The CAS standard guidelines (2011) note that successful college unions are comfortable and inviting spaces that offer opportunities for informal and spontaneous interactions. The spaces are designed to serve as the “living room” or “downtown” of higher education institutions (Spencer, 2017). Through my research, I explore whether the SLIC provides a comfortable, welcoming, and communal environment for students.

This study strives to understand how I can improve the SLIC space to enhance student belonging. Building a sense of belonging is important, as feeling that one belongs in the universe is a basic human need (Maslow, 1943; Parks, 2011). Students who feel a sense of belonging have an increased retention rate and they are more likely to receive a high GPA than their counterparts who do not feel like they belong (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). They also typically report having higher levels of self-worth. Pittman and Richmond (2008) find that students who feel an
attachment to their university are less likely to exhibit behavioral problems and they are more likely to get involved in extracurricular activities. This highlights the importance of creating spaces on campus that foster a sense of belonging.

For the constructs of my research I draw upon two definitions of belonging to provide a framework for my study. First, I draw upon Parks’ (2011) definition of networks of belonging. Parks (2011) defines belonging as, “a psychological home, crafted in intricate patterns of connection and interaction between the person and his or her community… [which provide] the trustworthy holding environment on which all humans depend for their flourishing within the wider world” (p. 115-116). Second, I explore Goodenow’s (1993) definition which states that belongingness is, “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (p. 80). I combine these concepts to define sense of belonging as a psychological home in which students feel accepted, respected, included, and supported. I use this definition because it emphasizes the physical and emotional “home.” This is appropriate, as my research studies how physical spaces influence students’ emotional responses, by exploring how the SLIC impacts student belonging.

For this research, I define physical structure as the layout of the space, including the location and positioning of furniture, computers, and other resources. I also consider the locations of student leader and professional staff work spaces, cubicles, and offices as a part of the structure. I am including the placement of objects and people, as both influence how students perceive the space. Including both of these elements aligns with the SLIC’s placemaking objectives, as the SLIC seeks to promote belonging through connecting students to their environment and those within it.
Needs Assessment

Observations of how students interact in the SLIC sparked my interest for conducting this research. During my three years working in the SLIC, I’ve noticed that some students choose to spend a majority of their free time studying and socializing in the space, while others come and go as quickly as possible. My desk is located in an open area near the door and courtyard. This offers the opportunity to listen to conversations and observe students as they enter and exit the space. Through observations, I have noticed that some students feel comfortable in the SLIC, while others feel a sense of unease. For example, I have observed that many fraternity men spend time in the SLIC, while students of color spend less time in the space. Through this research, I explore whether data supports my assumptions about the space. I also examine how the structure of the SLIC influences who spends time in the space. After looking at these components, I explore ways to enhance the SLIC so more students feel like they belong.

In addition, findings from the Huron Consulting Group’s analysis of USD show that many students do not feel a sense of belonging on campus. They recommend that units make changes to foster belonging among the students they serve (“Huron Presentation”, 2017). This finding solidifies the importance of this study, and reaffirms my desire to understand how the SLIC impacts student belonging.

Context

This study takes place at the University of San Diego, a medium-size, Catholic, liberal arts university in California. Specifically, this research occurs in the Student Leadership, Involvement, and Changemaking (SLIC) office. This space is located on the third floor of the Student Life Pavilion, a structure that houses the bookstore, dining hall, several campus centers, professional offices, and student spaces.
The SLIC has an open layout and the building wraps around a large courtyard. The SLIC is split into two sections. One half includes student government offices, student leader cubicles, graduate student cubicles, an open space for the professional staff, an open space for students, two advising rooms, a conference room, the Changemaker Hub, and the Mulvaney Center. The other half houses professional offices and the Creative Zone, a student space devoted to crafts and marketing. This study focuses on all areas of the SLIC with the exception of the professional office spaces (see Figure 1). I did not include the professional offices in the study, as the assistant director and director offices are private and are not open for undergraduate student use.

![Figure 1. SLIC Office Floor Plan](image)

In considering how the space impacts students, I focus on both the physical aspects of the space and the placement of people who work in the SLIC. The open office space includes an area where professional staff sit. This area is occupied by three assistant directors, and myself, the Activities and Budget Coordinator for Associated Students. The assistant directors have mobile desks and they sit in various corners of the room. My desk is stationary and positioned near the door so I can greet students. Next to the professional staff area, there are two student government
offices. On the opposite side of the space there are six cubicles where student leaders sit. Past this, there is an open space where students congregate. This space is partitioned by student leader and graduate assistant cubicles. Student staff occupy a desk in the professional staff area and a desk near the graduate cubicles. The Creative Zone is housed across the courtyard. The Creative Zone houses one professional who works from the back office area. It also includes student staff, who work at the front desk and facilitate the daily operations. For this research, I gather feedback from undergraduate students who have visited the spaces to learn their perspectives on the environment.

This research is important because my work as a student affairs professional is enhanced when students feel a sense of belonging on campus and in the office. I recognize that it can be difficult to enter new spaces and it can be challenging to discover spaces where one feels comfortable. After assessing how students perceive the SLIC, I offer ways to improve the environment to ensure that it is student-centered and focused on building belonging. This study benefits the student affairs community at USD as it provides a greater understanding of how students perceive campus spaces. The research can help us improve spaces to meet USD’s placemaking objectives of connecting students with their environment and creating spaces where students can build positive relationships.

As I prepared to start my research, I received an abundance of support from the professional staff in my area. I spoke with my supervisor, Josh Coyne, the Assistant Director for Associated Students, to gain permission to conduct this research. Josh played an integral role in framing my research and his feedback strengthened many aspects of this study. Other professional staff in my area, including my new supervisor Jennifer Lee, the Director of Student
Activities and Involvement, also played a fundamental role in supporting my research, offering advice, and suggesting ways to better align my study with university initiatives.

Even with this support, I anticipated that it would be challenging to implement changes to the space because our office’s design is embedded in politics including varying opinions about how the space should be designed and arranged, and multiple perspectives regarding space allocation. Based on this, I predicted that I would need to work with numerous members of the student affairs community to create buy-in for suggested changes. The importance of working with members of the student affairs community increased when redesigning the SLIC space was announced as a university initiative.

During Fall semester, as I began my research, Student Affairs implemented a restructure of the department based on recommendations from the Huron Consulting Group’s study at USD. In addition to changing people’s roles at the university, the restructure aimed to redesign aspects of the University Center and the third and fourth floor of the Student Life Pavilion. This increased the relevance of my research and it provided a challenge and an opportunity.

It provided a challenge because I needed to evaluate how I was conducting my research to ensure that my study aligned with university objectives. I feared that I would conduct a siloed project that did not contribute to the university’s conversation about the space. It also offered an opportunity, as the types of changes that I could realistically recommend increased from small and low-budget changes, to larger and more holistic changes. This transformed how I approached my research, something which is discussed in detail in later sections.

**Methodology**

For this research, I use Mills’ Dialectic Action Research Spiral (Mills, 2000). Mills’ (2000) methodology involves identifying a focus area, collecting data, analyzing data, and
creating an action plan (see Figure 2). The model gives the researcher the flexibility to revisit earlier phases as needed to reframe ideas and collect new data.

![Diagram of Dialectic Action Research Spiral](image)

**Figure 2.** Mills’ Dialectic Action Research Spiral (2000)

I utilize the Dialectic Action Research Spiral due to its emphasis on data collection and analysis, its strong pre-action cycle, and the flexibility that it offers (Mills, 2000). I believe that researchers are best equipped to make significant change when they are armed with data. This data can come from reflection, literature review, and information gathered from one’s research (Mills, 2000). Mills’ (2000) model emphasizes collecting and analyzing data prior to making changes. This aspect of the model appealed to me because I planned to conduct several cycles before implementing changes to the SLIC. I wanted to conduct several cycles because the layout of the SLIC is embedded in office politics and I wanted to ensure that I had strong data when proposing ways to adjust the space. My desire to collect strong data aligns with the model because Mills’ (2000) model offers researchers the opportunity to return and collect more data after analyzing the information that they have. This ensures research is valid and that data collected meets the researcher’s needs. This contributes to well informed research.

I also use this model because it allows for research focus areas to shift as the study progresses. As we learn our worldview changes, and this model gives researchers the option to reframe their focus as new information is revealed. In addition, research is never conducted in a
vacuum. Outside events can influence the direction of research, and this methodology allows for flexibility in the event that outside circumstances cause the scope of the research to change.

The emphasis on data collection, a pre-action cycle, and the flexibility of the model proved to be incredibly important during my research. After completing the first cycle of data collection, the university announced its plan to restructure. When this happened, I was unsure how the restructure would impact the physical aspects of the space and the people within it. As I learned more about the restructure it became clear that I would need to reframe aspects of my research in an effort to align my study with the university’s plan. This impacted the timeline of my research and my approach to all subsequent cycles. In addition, it affirmed that my decision to focus on gathering data from numerous cycles, before implementing or recommending changes, was an appropriate choice as making changes without considering the university’s timeline or process for augmenting the space would have been inefficient and unproductive.

My research consisted of three cycles which gather data on various aspects of the space and students’ sense of belonging. Based on these cycles, I make recommendations for enhancing the space.

**Cycle Overview**

When I began this study, I had a preliminary idea of how I was going to conduct my research, but I was open to adjusting my plan based on the data gathered from each cycle. For my first cycle, I distributed a survey to undergraduate students who had visited the SLIC during the month of September. This survey was designed to understand students’ sense of belonging in the SLIC and other campus spaces. This cycle offered a preliminary understanding of student belonging on campus, but the data collected was not as robust as I initially anticipated.
After concluding my first cycle of data collection, USD Student Affairs announced its plan to restructure. This announcement impacted my subsequent cycles because I decided to wait to learn more about the restructure before moving forward. I did this because I was unsure of how the restructure would impact the space and the people within it. I worried that my data would be skewed if information was collected when things were changing so rapidly.

Due to my shifted timeline, my second and third cycles took place during Spring semester. My second cycle consisted of interviews and focus groups with questions designed to explore students’ perceptions of the SLIC, the reasons why they do or don’t spend time in the space, and their suggestions for improving the space. I invited students who spend time on the third and fourth floor of the Student Life Pavilion (SLP) to participate. I expanded the scope of participants because I anticipated that the restructure would involve re-organizing aspects of the third and the fourth floor. Based on this assumption, I thought it would be important to understand how students who spend time in other parts of the SLP perceive the SLIC, as the restructure would impact students from multiple areas. The data from this cycle offered interesting insight into what aspects of the space work well and areas that can be improved.

Initially, my third cycle was going to consist of a photograph activity, in which I planned to have students take pictures of aspects of the space that increase or decrease their sense of belonging. However, after reviewing the data from my first two cycles, I realized that I would need to ask about specific components of the space in order to get concrete feedback. Thus, the third cycle consisted of a survey that asked students for feedback on specific areas of the SLIC using pictures to guide the questions. The survey also included questions on other aspects of the space such as the temperature, lighting, etc. This survey was distributed to all students who had been invited to participate in the previous cycles. I chose to open the survey to everyone, because
I felt that receiving feedback from a larger group would provide more concrete data. Based on this survey, I gathered recommendations for changing various physical aspects of the space.

When reviewing the findings from each cycle, it is important to note that many of the findings outlined in one cycle were reaffirmed in other cycles. While I limited the discussion of these findings to one cycle only, most of the themes were prevalent throughout the study. The information gathered from the cycles was used to make recommendations for changing the space. Detailed information regarding each cycle is reviewed in the upcoming sections.

Participants

There were 92 unique undergraduate students who participated in this study. Of these students, 68 participated in one cycle, twenty participated in two cycles, and four participated in all three cycles. I decided to include new participants in each cycle because I felt gathering data from a large number of students would provide a more holistic understanding of the space. Table 1 shows the number of undergraduate students who participated in each cycle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cycle</th>
<th>Data Collected</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cycle One</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle Two</td>
<td>Interviews and Focus Groups</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cycle Three</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Number of Participants Per Cycle

Cycles

Cycle I: Sense of Belonging Survey

What?: Qualtrics Survey

Why?: This survey was designed to develop an understanding of students’ sense of belonging at USD and in the SLIC. Questions were created to help the researcher understand why students are drawn to spend time in various campus spaces.

Who?: 39 undergraduate students
Of the 39 undergraduate student participants, thirteen were involved in Associated Students (AS) or Torero Program Board (TPB), ten were involved in Fraternity and Sorority Life (FSL), one was involved in the Changemaker Hub, five were involved in one student organization, five were involved in two student organizations, four were involved in three student organizations, ten were involved in four or more student organizations, and seven were involved in other extracurricular activities on campus. Examples of other extracurricular activities included internships on campus and membership on sports teams. All respondents were involved in at least one campus area.

Tables 2 and 3 show comparative demographic information of undergraduate survey participants and the undergraduate student body at the University of San Diego.

**Table 2. Gender Identity of Respondents (n=39)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>USD</th>
<th>Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3. Race of Respondents (n=39)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>USD</th>
<th>Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Info not available</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**When:** October 2017

**Survey Description:** The purpose of this cycle was to develop an understanding of students’ sense of belonging in the SLIC and other campus spaces. In this cycle, sense of belonging was defined as the extent to which one feels accepted, respected, included, supported, at home, and at
ease within the SLIC. The survey consisted of eight questions. Three questions used a Likert scale to examine students’ sense of belonging at USD and in the SLIC indoor spaces and outdoor spaces. Five questions were open-ended short response questions that examined where students spend their free time on campus, the attributes of the spaces that students prefer, and students’ utilization preferences for the SLIC. The survey questions (Appendix B) produced qualitative and quantitative data.

**Findings:**

**Types of Spaces Students Gravitate Towards:** Data surrounding the types of spaces where students prefer to spend time was collected through the questions, “What area of campus do you spend the most time in (outside of your classes/dorm/house)?” Also, “What do you like about the spaces identified in the previous question?” A majority of the participants said they spend most of their time on campus in the SLIC, Copley Library, and Aromas (See Graph 1 for a complete breakdown of where students prefer to spend time on campus).

![Graph 1. Campus Spaces that Students Gravitate Towards (n=39)](image-url)
Survey participants indicated that they are drawn to spend time in spaces that are quiet and comfortable. They also stated that they spend their time in places where they can study, be productive, or see people that they know. The SLIC was often described as being quiet, but not too quiet. Students who spend time in the SLIC explained that they often visit the SLIC to do their homework, have meetings, visit the Creative Zone, socialize, ask questions, and work on projects for AS/TPB or a student organization. Survey participants indicated that they sometimes prefer to spend time in places outside the SLIC because those spaces are quieter and have food available.

**Students’ Sense of Belonging in the SLIC and at USD:** The majority of the students surveyed stated that they feel a moderate to strong sense of belonging in the SLIC and at USD. The data indicates that respondents feel a stronger connection to USD than the SLIC. This is shown, as a majority of students responded that they “feel a very strong sense of belonging” or a “strong sense of belonging” when describing USD. Comparatively, when describing their sense of belonging in the SLIC, students’ responses were more evenly spread between, “I feel a moderate sense of belonging,” and, “I feel a very strong sense of belonging.” Beyond this, no students indicated that they, “do not feel a sense of belonging” at USD, while two students indicated that they, “do not feel a sense of belonging” in the SLIC. This shows that students feel a stronger connection to USD than the SLIC.

Another interesting finding is that students feel a stronger sense of belonging in the courtyard than the indoor spaces. This is shown as more students selected, “I feel a very strong sense of belonging,” when asked about the SLIC courtyard, as compared to the indoor spaces. While a majority of students stated that they feel a moderate to strong sense of belonging in all SLIC spaces; three students indicated that they feel little to no sense of belonging in the indoor
spaces, and only one student indicated that they do not feel a sense of belonging in the courtyard. This shows that students’ sense of belonging in the courtyard may be slightly higher than their sense of belonging in the indoor SLIC spaces. Graph 2 shows a breakdown of student sense of belonging in the various spaces.

**Graph 2. Student Sense of Belonging in the SLIC and at USD (n=39)**

Surveyed students who are comfortable in the SLIC suggested that they feel a sense of belonging because the space is welcoming and it creates community. Participants highlighted that the SLIC is welcoming through comments such as, “Everyone (including faculty and students) are very welcoming and friendly there,” and, “It’s a nice and welcoming environment.” They also emphasized community through statements like, “I feel comfortable, because if you go there often enough people will remember you,” “[The SLIC] provides a space where I feel comfortable going, knowing there is always someone there to talk to you,” and “I feel comfortable because there is a sense of community in the SLIC.”
Responses also demonstrate that student belonging may be linked to holding a formal leadership role. Some students conveyed that they didn’t feel comfortable in the SLIC before they held a leadership position. This is shown through statements such as, “Yes [I feel comfortable in the space], but only because I am involved in things that take place up there so I don’t feel out of place anymore,” and, “I do feel comfortable. I think it is because I know that I have a role assigned to me through TPB that is best carried out in the SLIC.”

Other students expressed that they still feel some discomfort in the space because they don’t have a strong connection in the SLIC. These students made statements such as, “Sometimes it’s weird to study inside because it has a very work-esque environment and I’m not part of AS or TPB so I can feel misplaced!” And, “Sometimes I feel like I am intruding if I don't have a personal connection in certain offices.”

One student stated, “I know people who also visit that space which makes me feel comfortable. Before I knew people, I thought that space was only for leaders or those actively involved on campus.” This statement effectively summarizes the data above, as it shows that many students feel a sense of belonging in the SLIC because they hold a formal leadership role that is emphasized in the space, or because they have a personal connection in the space.

**Influence of Race on Student Preferences Towards Spending Time in the SLIC:** When reviewing the spaces where students prefer to spend time on campus in conjunction with student demographics, a connection can be made between students’ race and their desire to spend time in the SLIC. 39 undergraduate students participated in this cycle. Seventeen of these participants indicated that they spend most of their time outside of their dorm/classes in the SLIC. Of the seventeen students who spend most of their time in the SLIC, thirteen self-identified as white. Twenty-two students indicated that they spend a majority of their time in other campus spaces.
Twelve of these students identified as white and ten identified with races other than white. In other words, of the students of color surveyed, 29% spend the majority of their time in the SLIC, while 71% spend the majority of their time in other campus spaces. This can be compared to 59% of white student participants who spend a majority of their time in the SLIC and 41% of white students who prefer to spend time in other spaces. This data is interesting, as it highlights that there may be a connection between race and sense of belonging in the SLIC.

**Limitations:** After reviewing the survey data I realized that most participants reported a sense of belonging in the space. This is likely because all participants in this cycle were involved on campus. The data from this cycle shows that students with a leadership position feel a greater sense of belonging in the SLIC. Thus, it can be inferred that the students surveyed felt a stronger sense of belonging because of their involvement, which could have influenced the data on belonging. While the survey collected data from a few students who don’t feel a sense of belonging in the SLIC, it would be beneficial to hear from more students who are not involved on campus and it would be interesting to gather data from additional students who do not feel a connection to the space.

In addition, when I crafted this survey, I was hoping to gather feedback on aspects of the SLIC that can be changed to increase students’ sense of belonging via the question, “Would you like to see any changes made to the physical structure/layout of the SLIC? If so, what changes would you like to see?” The majority of students who responded to the survey indicated that they didn’t have any suggestions for change. This elucidated that I would need to ask more specific questions to gather data on ways to improve physical aspects of the space. Thus, the initial survey provided useful background information on the SLIC space and students’ sense of
belonging on campus, but it did not provide data that could be used to suggest concrete ways to improve the space to increase students’ sense of belonging.

**Reflection:** This survey provided useful data, some of which offered new insight into the SLIC spaces, and some of which confirmed what I already believed to be true. Through this survey, I was able to gather information on where students enjoy spending time on campus and what aspects of the spaces they are drawn to. I was also able to gather data on students’ sense of belonging in the SLIC and at USD, and what influences student belonging.

When I first reviewed the survey data, I was pleased that 39 students participated in the survey, as I felt I could gain great insight from hearing the perspectives of a large number of students. I was happy to find that a majority of students surveyed felt a sense of belonging in the SLIC and at USD, but this finding also made me question how my role influenced the data collected. I wondered if my relationships with students who spend time in the SLIC caused certain students to respond to the survey, thus increasing the number of students who reported a sense of belonging. This question was something I hoped to explore in subsequent cycles.

I was also intrigued to learn how the SLIC space compared to other spaces on campus. I was glad to find that students are looking to spend time in comfortable places where they can study or spend time with friends, as the SLIC was described to have all these qualities. I was also happy that many students described the SLIC as a welcoming space where they feel a sense of community. This was a relief, as I attempt to create a welcoming environment, by saying hello to students who enter the SLIC near my desk and by encouraging SLIC student employees to do the same.

The survey data supports my initial assumptions that students feel connected to the SLIC because they know people in the space or have a formal leadership position. I often notice the
same students spend time in the SLIC and many of these students have a formal leadership role. The data highlights that students choose to spend time in the space because of their positions or personal connections.

Finally, reviewing the survey data leads me to wonder why a majority of students of color stated that they feel a sense of belonging in the SLIC, but reported spending a majority of their time in other campus spaces. While working in the SLIC, I have observed that a majority of the students who spend time in the space are white, and I often wonder if this is a reflection of the greater campus community or an outcome that can be attributed to other aspects of the space. While the survey didn’t provide enough data to confirm why students of color feel a sense of belonging in the SLIC, but choose to spend time in other places on campus, I think it highlighted an interesting space dynamic.

**Cycle II: Focus Groups and Interviews**

**What?:** Focus Groups and Interviews

**Why?:** This cycle was designed to understand students’ perceptions of the SLIC. Questions were created to explore what aspects of the SLIC contribute to students’ sense of belonging and what aspects of the space can be improved.

**Who?:** 14 undergraduate students

All of the student participants indicated involvement on campus. Six respondents were involved in Associated Students or the Torero Program Board, one was involved in Fraternity and Sorority Life, one was involved in the Changemaker Hub, three were involved in one student organization, three were involved in two student organizations, one was involved in three student organizations, and three were involved in four or more student organizations. Five students participated in more than one of the listed areas.
Of the participants, nine indicated that they feel a sense of belonging in the SLIC, two indicated a neutral feeling towards the space, and three indicated that they do not feel a sense of belonging. All of the students who indicated a neutral feeling or who said that they do not feel a sense of belonging were involved in student organizations. These students were not involved in any other areas housed in the SLIC, such as Associated Students, Torero Program Board, Fraternity and Sorority Life, or the Changemaker Hub.

Tables 4 and 5 show comparative demographic information of undergraduate student participants and the undergraduate student body at the University of San Diego.

*Table 4. Gender Identity of Respondents (n=14)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>USD</th>
<th>Interviews &amp; Focus Groups</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
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*Table 5. Race of Respondents (n=14)*

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<th>Race</th>
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<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
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<td>Unknown</td>
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*When:* February 2018

*Focus Group/Interview Description:* The purpose of this cycle was to explore how the layout, resources, and areas housed within the SLIC impact students’ sense of belonging. The focus group/interview guide consisted of ten open-ended questions (Appendix C). Three of the questions were introductory questions designed to understand how much time students spend in the SLIC, when students choose to spend time in the space, why they utilize the space at certain
times, and what parts of the space they use. Two questions examined how the presence of professional and graduate staff impact students’ sense of belonging. Four questions focused on understanding students’ perceptions of the space and how the various aspects of the SLIC impact their sense of belonging. One question asked for suggestions on how the space could be improved. The responses to these questions produced qualitative data.

**Findings:**

**Perceptions of the SLIC Space:** Many of the participants indicated that the SLIC is difficult to navigate. Comments such as, “It can feel a little bit like a maze a times,” and, “I remember I had no idea where to go,” show students’ confusion when first encountering the space. Students also highlighted that it can be challenging to discern which spaces are reserved for specific purposes. One student commented, “At times it can get confusing because you don’t know which desk is for which purpose.” Another student said, “It’s just a little confusing whose territory is whose or if something is going on, so maybe labelling…it would be helpful to know if I could meet in an area or if there was somewhere else.”

Students emphasized that while spaces can be difficult to navigate at first, using the spaces becomes easier over time. A student highlighted this idea when they said, “When I first got up there I had no idea what was going on, but after a while it was comfortable.” These comments show that the SLIC is difficult for newcomers to navigate and that the ways students are able to utilize the space is not clear. This impacts students’ sense of belonging, as students feel less inclined to spend time in spaces whose purpose is not clear.

In conjunction with experiencing difficulty navigating the space, some students are unaware of the space. Many of the students indicated that their peers are unaware of the SLIC through comments such as, “The SLIC is a nice place. I just wish people knew more about it. Or
where it is. They ask, ‘What is the SLIC? What does SLIC stand for? There’s an upstairs?’” And, “When we had our first club meeting, the first couple times it’s been in the courtyard out here. And when students come up, especially Freshmen, they’re like, ‘I didn’t know this was here.’” This demonstrates that some students may not use the SLIC and its resources due to a lack of awareness of the space.

**Presence of Student Staff:** Participants in this cycle indicated that the student staff are helpful guides, especially for those who are new to the SLIC. While many of the students surveyed said that they no longer needed to ask the student staff for help once they became comfortable in the space, they also noted that the students helped them feel comfortable when they first encountered the SLIC. One student summarized this point by saying, “I think it’s important to have student staff… For me it’s a familiar face or just a casual conversation or something like that. It doesn’t make the space seem so big or with lofty ideals…It kind of introduces you into the space.” This shows that the student staff play a vital role in welcoming students and helping them navigate the space, especially when they are unfamiliar with the SLIC. Thus, the student staff play a role in increasing sense of belonging for students who are first visiting the space.

**Impact of Professional Staff and the Open Office Setting:** All of the students who participated in the interviews and focus groups noted that having professional staff and graduate student staff in the SLIC positively impacts their experience. Students also indicated that having staff in an open office setting increases accessibility and fosters working relationships. One student expressed this sentiment by saying, “It’s important to have administrators there and having an open concept is important to show there aren’t really walls between student and administrator dialogue.” Another student expressed her preference for the open space by commenting, “It’s promoting the tenant that the school is trying to build in with transformational experiences. In
these working environments students and staff grow off of one another. To remove you guys or change up the dynamics in ways that moves staff from students, I feel like that would take it away. It would create a barrier to accessibility.” These statements highlight that housing the SLIC staff in an open office setting is important to building relationships, providing resources to students, and creating connections with those who use the space.

**Limitations:** While this cycle produced interesting data about the space, the information gathered may be biased due to my role at the university. For example, all students in this cycle spoke positively about the presence of professional staff in the open office space. Since I am a professional staff member who works in the office, these responses may have been influenced by a desire to speak positively about the staff in my presence. In addition, a majority of the students who participated in the interviews and focus groups were students who I interact with frequently. This relationship shows that these students are comfortable interacting with professional staff. I wonder if the data would have been different if students were interviewed by their peers or by someone who does not work in the SLIC. It would also be helpful to interview students who do not use the SLIC to see how they perceive the space.

**Reflection:** This cycle was fascinating as I was able to hear various student perspectives on how the physical structures and the presence of staff impact belonging in the SLIC. Since I had the opportunity to conduct several meetings to gather data, it was enlightening to see which themes were consistently discussed. For example, while I previously postulated that the SLIC can be difficult to navigate, I was surprised by the number of students who spoke of this facet of the space. Students discussed how they were not only confused when first entering the space, but how they continued to be unsure of the functions of various spaces. This was even true for students who indicated that they spend several hours a week in the SLIC. I was surprised by this
finding, as I assumed that the students who use the space frequently feel a sense of ownership over the space. Learning that these students were also uncertain of how to use the space reminds me not to make assumptions about peoples’ experiences and it affirms the importance of conducting research like this periodically, to ensure I am properly advocating for the student groups I encounter.

Beyond this, I was surprised to find that a majority of participants appreciated the presence of professional staff in an open work environment. While I always felt that the open space enhanced my work and understanding of students, I also wondered if students were intimidated by the presence of professional and graduate student staff. I was pleased that students viewed the presence of staff as an asset to the SLIC. It was also interesting to learn that students found the idea of going to administrators’ offices to be more intimidating than working in close proximity to professional staff.

While all of the cycles produced useful information, I found this cycle to be the most meaningful as I had the opportunity to meet with students to discuss their experiences. I enjoyed hearing multiple perspectives on the space and it was wonderful to meet students who I had not met previously. The interviews and focus groups also offered an opportunity to learn more about several students who I already knew and it challenged some of my perspectives. This cycle taught me the importance of periodically assessing various aspects of my work to ensure that my perceptions are aligned with the student experience. Doing this will help me develop as a student-facing practitioner.

**Cycle III: SLIC Space Survey**

**What?**: Online Survey
Why?: This cycle was created to understand how specific aspects of the SLIC impact students’ sense of belonging. Questions were designed to gather feedback on each area of the SLIC included in the study. Questions also examined how physical features, such as lighting and temperature, impact students’ experiences in the space.

Who?: 70 undergraduate students

Of the students surveyed, all but one indicated involvement on campus. 25 students were a part of AS or TPB, 24 participated in Fraternity and Sorority Life, five were involved with the Changemaker Hub, fourteen indicated that they were a part of one student organization, nineteen were involved in two student organizations, fifteen were a part of three student organizations, and ten were involved in four or more student organizations. Four students surveyed also indicated involvement in other areas of campus life. This shows that the majority of the student participants were actively involved on campus.

To measure students’ sense of belonging in the SLIC, a Likert scale was utilized. Graph 3 shows how the students described their sense of belonging in the space.

![Graph 3. Student Sense of Belonging in the SLIC (n=70)](image-url)
In addition, Tables 6 and 7 show comparative demographic information of undergraduate student survey participants and the undergraduate student body at the University of San Diego.

*Table 6. Gender Identity of Respondents (n=70)*

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*Table 7. Race of Respondents (n=70)*

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When: March 2018

Survey Description: This survey consisted of 24 questions (Appendix D). One question used a Likert scale to understand students’ sense of belonging in the SLIC. Eleven questions used pictures to gather feedback on specific areas located on the third floor of the SLP. Ten questions used a Likert scale to explore how aspects of the SLIC such as the lighting, temperature, and furniture impact belonging. Three questions were open-ended questions created to gather additional information on the resources available. All of the questions were created to collect specific feedback on what aspects of the SLIC space are working well and which areas can be improved to increase belonging. The survey results produced qualitative and quantitative data.

Findings:
Types of Art that Create Belonging: Currently, artwork in the SLIC includes pictures of Torero Program Board events, students at TPB events, photos of the university, bulletin boards, and artwork related to the student government. One survey question asked students to indicate what type of artwork they prefer to see displayed in the SLIC. Responses indicate that students prefer to see pictures of events and students. Participants shared that pictures of events cultivate a sense of pride for the campus, they conjure positive memories, and they create a connection to USD’s history. Pictures of students, “show student involvement the best” and they are, “more personal, like at home.” Students also indicated that the types of events and pictures that are included in the space impact who feels a connection. Artwork should include pictures from a larger variety of groups and types of events to foster belonging for a multitude of students.

Students Prefer a Layout that Fosters Community: Another portion of this survey asked participants to look at pictures of the SLIC with various furniture formations to select which layout fostered the greatest sense of belonging. The survey respondents indicated a preference for a square or clustered table formation and a square couch formation (Figure 3).

![Square Table Formation](image1.png) ![Clustered Table Formation](image2.png) ![Square Seating Area](image3.png)

*Figure 3. Preferred Space Formations in the SLIC*
The square table formation is identical to the formation that was in the SLIC when the survey was distributed. The couch formation is also similar to the formation that was in the SLIC when the survey was distributed. The couch formation pictured differs from the layout at the time of survey distribution as it includes a larger communal seating area.

Students said that they prefer these layouts because they foster community and encourage peer interaction. For example, students described their preference for the square table formation through comments such as, “These formations allow students to engage with one another,” and, “Something feels communal about students facing one another.” Other students described their preference for the clustered table formation through statements like, “These configurations would be conducive to more natural collaboration while also not opening one up to the entire room,” and, “[This configuration] seems more casual and [it creates] an inviting place to talk with a group.” Finally, students described the square seating area by saying, “The square formation around the coffee table is reminiscent of a family room and allows for people to engage in conversation,” and, “This area I see as a gathering place, where students can come together and talk, and a square formation promotes those interactions.” All of these descriptions focus on community building and interacting with others in the space. This shows that students are drawn to spaces that allow them to make connections and have natural interactions with their peers. Thus, belonging is increased by communal work spaces, like the ones pictured above.

Open Spaces Promote Belonging: The importance that students place on communal work spaces is also shown through data which demonstrates that students feel more welcome in open office environments. Survey questions asked students to indicate their sense of belonging in various SLIC spaces including the student leader cubicle area, the graduate student cubicle area, and the professional staff open work space. Comparative data shows that closed work spaces, such as
cubicles, are detrimental to student sense of belonging. Of the spaces included in the survey, the student leader cubicles received the lowest ratings for student sense of belonging followed by the graduate student cubicle area. Student descriptions of these areas highlight the separation that the cubicles create. For example, one student said, “It creates a separation between them and us.” Another student said, “It feels very closed off, and I never know who’s back there.” Students highlighted that they prefer the graduate student cubicle area over the student leader cubicle space because they can see the graduate students’ faces. This distinction emphasizes the importance of visibility in connecting students to resources and people.

In contrast to the cubicle spaces, the open office area where the professional staff sit received high ratings for sense of belonging. Students described how they prefer the open office setting through comments like, “Having an open work space for professional staff increases my sense of belonging because it breaks down a barrier of authority. As a student leader, having access to the staff is valuable to the work that I try to accomplish. This open space makes them accessible and creates a welcoming environment.” This shows that students appreciate an open setting and that they view it as more conducive to building relationships and accessing resources. Comparing students’ perceptions of the various work spaces, it is clear that the open work spaces are more beneficial to building belonging than cubicles and closed offices.

Students’ Sense of Ownership of the Space: While students enjoy interacting in an open office setting, many students also commented that the environment makes them feel like they can’t “own” the space. Some students expressed this by mentioning that various parts of the SLIC can be intimidating, especially for those who are first visiting, because they are “claimed spaces.” One student described their first impressions of the graduate student area by saying, “I didn't know they were graduate students there to help, so I saw it as a claimed space that I was
intruding in if I sat near it.” Another student said, “When I was not a part of AS, this was intimidating because I did not want to invade their space while they were working. Now that I am a senator, it is helpful to have all of my resources in one place.” Both of these statements show that students grow to appreciate the staff members in the space, but that they are intimidated by the dynamic at first. Students expanded upon this idea by explaining that the SLIC can feel like an office and that students feel like they’re interrupting when they enter the space. Statements such as, “I think it is a work related area, so I am usually more careful not to disturb or distract whoever is there,” highlight this idea.

Because the SLIC can feel like an office environment with “claimed” areas, students are less likely to take ownership of the space. When asked, half of the students surveyed said they don’t feel like they can own the space. This is evident, as students rarely adjust the table and chair formations, they are hesitant to write on the chalkboards, and they seldom use the refrigerators, coffee makers, and other amenities. Despite students’ tendency to leave the space as they found it, students expressed a desire to take more ownership. For example, many students indicated that they would like more chalkboards and whiteboards, so they can express their ideas and personalize the space. They also noted that these resources would be helpful for group meetings and study sessions. This data shows that in order to increase students’ sense of belonging, changes need to be implemented that foster student ownership of the SLIC.

The Creative Zone Increases Sense of Belonging: The Creative Zone received the highest ratings for students’ sense of belonging. Of the students surveyed, 67% indicated that the Creative Zone increases their sense of belonging. This may be because students feel a greater sense of ownership over the Creative Zone. For example, one student commented, “This appeals to me as the students’ space, like they have a sense of ownership.” Other students stated that they
like the Creative Zone because it is welcoming, community oriented, and fun. Statements such as, “I think the creative space might be the best part of the SLIC and one of the best parts of USD. It allows students to unwind and have fun,” and, “This is a great place to cultivate creativity, and the layout encourages community,” highlight these ideas.

Data from this cycle shows that students are drawn to spend time in open and communal spaces. The Creative Zone exhibits these qualities as it is located in an open room with a large table where students can work on projects. In addition, the art in the Creative Zone is diverse, as students are able to hang their artwork on the walls. This allows students to express themselves and take ownership of the space. Beyond this, students may feel a connection to the space because the Creative Zone is the only place on the third floor where undergraduates without an affiliation with a specific office have resources available to them. The Creative Zone includes resources, such as free printing, art supplies, and graphic design, which are helpful tools for academics and extracurricular activities. The variety of needs that the Creative Zone serves may cause more students to interpret the space as a place where they are welcome.

Because students feel a strong sense of belonging in the Creative Zone, many expressed a desire for the hours of operation to be expanded. The Creative Zone is currently open from 10am-5pm, Monday through Friday. 31 of the 70 student participants expressed that they would appreciate having the Creative Zone open earlier and close later. One student stated this preference by saying, “I love the SLIC, sometimes I just wish there was more time to use the Creative Zone.” Another student said, “I would love longer hours at the Creative Zone. I like using the Creative Zone for group projects, but it's often not possible since we meet to do the work in the evenings.” This highlights that students enjoy using the Creative Zone and that its positive impact could be enhanced by expanding the hours of operation.
The Courtyard Increases Sense of Belonging: Students also indicated that the courtyard area cultivates belonging. Survey participants stated that they like the courtyard because, “[The] openness makes it feel like more of a student space,” and, “It has a homey and comfortable vibe.” Students also described it as, “Less intimidating than the indoor areas,” and, “Busier, more festival like, less like I'll be conspicuous walking through or sitting down.” These statements highlight that the courtyard is a place that students are comfortable using. They also show that the indoor spaces can be intimidating, affirming some of the findings discussed in earlier sections. Student belonging could be increased by transferring some of the “homey” components of the outdoor SLIC spaces to other parts of the third floor.

Many Other Aspects of the SLIC Also Promote Belonging: In addition to the spaces mentioned above, many facets of the SLIC cause students to feel comfortable in the space. A majority of survey participants either agreed or strongly agreed that the lighting, temperature, and furniture in the SLIC are comfortable. They also indicated that the SLIC office hours meet their needs and that professional staff are available at convenient times. These responses show that many aspects of the SLIC are meeting placemaking objectives. These components provide a strong foundation for any proposed changes.

Limitations: As mentioned in previous cycles, the students who participated in this survey and the feedback offered was most likely impacted by my role and the working relationships that I have with the student participants. Student perspectives may have looked different if someone else had administered the survey. In order to gain a more holistic understanding of the space, a larger team with people from different areas of campus would need to collect data.

In addition, the data collected may be impacted by the pictures selected. For example, students may have indicated a different feeling about the courtyard if photos had been taken with
different lighting or from a different perspective. While I think the pictures offer a strong foundation for discussing the spaces, it is difficult to know how the photos selected influenced student responses.

**Reflection:** After conducting my first two cycles, I decided to reimagine my third cycle as a survey instead of a photograph activity. After reviewing the data collected from the earlier cycles, I felt that I had interesting information on the space, but that I didn’t have a holistic understanding of how the physical aspects of the third floor impact students’ sense of belonging. I hoped that by asking specific questions about the space, in a survey format, I would be able to gather concrete information about how components of the SLIC impact belonging.

After creating a draft of the survey, I met with my supervisor Jennifer Lee, the Director of Student Activities and Involvement, my action research supervisor Josh Coyne, the Assistant Director for Associated Students, and my co-worker Manda Sayegh, the Assistant Director for Student Organizations and Involvement. I also sent the survey to the Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs, Dr. Cynthia Avery. The feedback that I received from each of these people was valuable in framing my questions and expanding the scope of this cycle. For example, Dr. Avery encouraged me to ask about components that I had not considered, such as the lighting and temperature in the space. Researching these aspects increased my understanding of the space and how a variety of visible and invisible factors can impact belonging. I was appreciative of each person’s willingness to offer feedback. The data collected was stronger due to the recommendations I received.

As I reviewed the data from this cycle, I was pleased by the information gathered. I was happy that 70 people participated in the survey, as having a large number of student voices helped me discover trends and it validated assumptions that I had drawn from earlier cycles. For
example, responses from earlier cycles led me to assume that the Creative Zone was a space where students feel the greatest sense of belonging. The data gathered offered concrete evidence for this preference.

In addition, I was pleased that survey responses offered specific feedback on various other parts of the space. The data gathered made me feel confident in my recommendations for changing the layout of the space.

**Recommendations for the SLIC Space**

*Focus on Creating Spaces that Build Community:* Data from all three cycles shows that students are drawn to places that promote community. The data shows that many features of the SLIC, such as the communal work spaces, are conducive to community building.

On a small scale, there is a great opportunity to foster community by continuing to create group work spaces and by adding art that appeals to a larger student population. The space can continue to house square table and couch formations or clustered working areas to promote student engagement, as indicated by survey results. In addition, pictures of students and events that appeal to a variety of groups can be posted on the walls. Most of the pictures that are currently hanging in the space are of events hosted by the Torero Program Board. To make the space more welcoming to students in other groups, pictures from club or university events can be added to the walls. Adding more pictures of students will create a sense of belonging for a larger portion of the community, as students will receive visual cues that show they are welcome in the space. The pictures will be most effective in building community if the photos represent the diversity found in the student population. These small changes would help the SLIC meet its placemaking objectives, as they would help students feel a stronger connection to the space and they would encourage relationship building (Pawlik-Kienlen, 2015).
In addition, adding resources such as whiteboards, chalkboards, bean bag chairs, and charging stations will make the spaces more conducive to student interaction and expression. Student interactions are impacted by how spaces are designed and arranged (Oblinger, 2009). Adding these components will offer students the resources needed to use the SLIC as a study space, meeting place, or relaxation area. Offering these resources will promote students’ sense of ownership, as students will be able to use the spaces in a multitude of ways that better meet their needs. They will also be able to leave their mark on the spaces and communicate with others through artistic expression. These additional resources will help build community, as students will be able to personalize the space to serve a variety of needs.

On a large scale, the space can be changed to promote community by enhancing the open office concept. To do this, the student leader and graduate assistant cubicles can be replaced with open office working spaces. Removing the cubicles will make the space more open to collaboration and relationship building. It will also make it feel like there are fewer “claimed” spaces, something which will make the SLIC more welcoming to those who do not have a designated work space. This would help the SLIC meet the objectives of the CAS standard guidelines (2011), as it would create a more communal environment.

Finally, the university can consider how adjusting locations of offices on the third and fourth floor will impact who feels a sense of belonging. For example, co-locating some of the identity centers with the student leadership offices could change the dynamics of the spaces to foster belonging for a larger group of students. Currently, some students view the SLIC as a place that is inhabited by mostly white students. Having identity centers on the third and fourth floor could reduce the perception that the third floor is a predominantly white space. This will build belonging for a larger portion of the student population.
**Designate the Areas in the SLIC More Clearly:** The findings from this research indicate that many students are unaware of the SLIC and that the space is difficult to navigate for newcomers. Increased signage would improve the space’s legibility and coherence, which would evoke a more positive emotional response from students and increase their sense of belonging (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1982).

Currently, there is little signage in the University Center that directs people to the third and fourth floors of the SLP. Increased signage on the main floors will help promote awareness of the spaces. For example, it would be helpful to add signs promoting the SLIC to the stairwell that leads up to the third floor and to the areas near the elevator. These signs will help students discover the space.

There is also little signage once students enter the SLIC. Adding a sign that directs students when they enter the courtyard will welcome students to the various areas on the floor. In addition, adding more visible signs to the doorways will help students navigate the spaces. It will also be helpful to include signs in the indoor spaces. These signs should welcome students to open areas and indicate which areas are available for student use. It will be helpful if these signs are created in student facing ways. For example, these signs can be created using chalkboards.

When creating these signs, it will be important to consider how the verbiage and labelling will impact student perceptions of the SLIC. For example, there is a perception that the SLIC is reserved for members of Associated Students, Torero Program Board, and Fraternity and Sorority Life. By promoting it as a place for all student leaders, rather than students in these particular groups, more students will feel a sense of belonging. Helping students navigate the spaces more easily will increase their confidence when they enter the SLIC, something which will also help students feel a greater connection to the space.
Extend the Creative Zone’s Hours of Operation: This research shows that the Creative Zone increases students’ sense of belonging and that many students would like to use the Creative Zone beyond its current hours of operation. I recommend extending the hours of operation to 9am-7pm, Monday through Friday, so more students can use the space. This will help promote students’ sense of belonging in the SLIC, as students will have resources available to them at more convenient times.

Celebrate and Promote Spaces that Are Working Well: While I have suggested several ways to augment the space, it is also important to acknowledge that many aspects already create a sense of belonging. When considering possible changes, it is vital to recognize that aspects, such as the open offices, the courtyard, and the Creative Zone, are already working well. These components can be viewed as aspirational spaces that exemplify our placemaking objectives at work.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study represents a glimpse into student sense of belonging in the SLIC. To gain a deeper understanding of student belonging in the space, I suggest continuing this research on a larger scale. I recommend working with students from other areas of campus to learn how they interpret the space. It would also be interesting to talk with students who have never visited the SLIC. In addition, I recommend having additional practitioners collect data. This will provide more robust data, as students will provide different information to different people. It will also provide stronger data, as it would allow research to be collected from multiple perspectives. When conducting this research, I brought my own assumptions, beliefs, and experiences with me. It would be beneficial to see how other researchers frame their study of the space based on their experiences.
Beyond this, it would be fascinating to study another space on campus where students indicated a strong sense of belonging, such as Copley Library or Aromas. This would provide an opportunity to compare the spaces to understand how students’ perceptions of the spaces are similar and different from their perceptions of the SLIC. The data gathered from this comparative research would be beneficial to interpreting the SLIC space in the context of other spaces. It could also offer insight into facets of other campus spaces that can be applied to the SLIC to increase students’ sense of belonging.

Finally, I recommend making some of the suggested changes and assessing how those changes impact students’ sense of belonging. In order to truly serve students, this research will need to be ongoing, as student preferences change from year to year.

**Recommendations for My Own Learning**

Conducting this research was a valuable experience, as it highlighted the importance of assessing aspects of my work and it demonstrated the benefits of collaboration and relationship building. While I was conducting this research, I encountered several students who I had never met before and I got to know many students that I encounter frequently on a deeper level. Learning their stories provided new insights into the space and how students experience USD. Moving forward, I hope to take more time to connect with students that I do not work with directly. This will help me to continuously grow as a practitioner.

Beyond this, I look to continue forming connections with professionals who I do not encounter in my daily work, as collaboration provides opportunities to explore new perspectives. In my current role, I do not sit on very many campus committees and I tend to encounter the same group of educators. This research offered an opportunity to collaborate with professionals who I do not work with as frequently. This was beneficial, as I learned from their experiences.
and perspectives. In the future, I hope to look for more opportunities to collaborate and connect with professionals in various areas of campus life, as I believe we can be valuable resources to each other.

Finally, in order to contribute what I’ve learned to the campus community, I plan to participate in the upcoming charrette which will be held at the end of April. This charrette is intended to explore ways to augment the third and fourth floor of the Student Life Pavilion to better serve students. As a participant in these meetings, I will contribute what I’ve learned from my action research and I will recommend the changes outlined in this paper. The charrette will offer an opportunity to continue building upon my research, and it will contribute to my personal growth as I will be able to hear others’ perspectives on the space. It will be interesting to hear how the data that I’ve collected aligns with other practitioners’ experiences and it will be fascinating to see how others interpret the space differently. I look forward to collaborating with this group to explore ways that we can improve the space, beyond the recommendations I have suggested.

**Conclusion**

Overall, I am proud of my completed action research project. This research elucidated the impact that space can have on students’ sense of belonging. As a practitioner, I’ve always aimed to create environments where students feel welcome and at home. Prior to starting this research, I looked to do this by focusing on how our office’s policies and my personal practices impact the student experience. Completing this project showed the impact that space also has on fostering a sense of belonging. Incorporating this knowledge into my practice will allow me to foster a more holistic approach to create environments that build belonging. I am excited to share what I’ve
learned with the campus community, as the information gathered will be useful in upcoming conversations about how to update the third and fourth floor of the SLP.
References


Appendix A
Demographic Profile Questionnaire

1. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female
   - Non-binary/Third gender
   - Other
   - Decline to State

2. What is your race or ethnicity?
   - American Indian or Alaska Native
   - Asian
   - Black or African American
   - Hispanic or Latino
   - White
   - Two or more races
   - Other
   - Unknown

3. What is your current year in school?
   - 1st Year Student
   - 2nd Year Student
   - 3rd Year Student
   - 4th Year Student
   - 5th Year Student
   - 6th Year Student
   - Transfer Student
   - Graduate Student
   - Not applicable – Professional Staff/Administrator
   - Other

4. Would you consider yourself an in-state student or an out-of-state student?
   - In-State Student
   - Out-Of-State Student

5. Are you involved in any student organizations? Please list all involvement.
Appendix B

Sense of Belonging Survey

Thank you for taking part in this survey which seeks to understand how the Student Leadership, Involvement, and Changemaking (SLIC) space influences student sense of belonging. The SLIC area refers to the spaces on the 3rd floor of the Student Life Pavilion. In this context, sense of belonging refers to the extent to which one feels accepted, respected, included, supported, at home, and at ease within the space. This survey will take approximately 15 minutes. Please answer all questions honestly and thoughtfully. Your responses will be kept anonymous.

1. Please rate your sense of belonging in the SLIC space (Likert Scale 1-5).

5 – I feel a very strong sense of belonging
4 – I feel a strong sense of belonging
3 – I feel a moderate sense of belonging
2 – I feel little sense of belonging
1 – I do not feel a sense of belonging

2. Please rate your sense of belonging at the University of San Diego (Likert Scale 1-5).

5 – I feel a very strong sense of belonging
4 – I feel a strong sense of belonging
3 – I feel a moderate sense of belonging
2 – I feel little sense of belonging
1 – I do not feel a sense of belonging

3. What areas of campus do you spend the most time in (outside of your classes/dorm/house)?

4. What do you like about the spaces identified in the previous question?

5. What are your primary reasons for visiting the SLIC?

6. Do you feel comfortable spending time in the SLIC space? What causes you to feel comfortable or uncomfortable in the space?

7. Would you like to see any changes made to the physical structure/layout of the SLIC? If so, what changes would you like to see?
Appendix C
Focus Group and Interview Guide

Thank you for meeting with me. The purpose of this focus group/interview is to collect data on how the Student Leadership, Involvement, and Changemaking (SLIC) space influences students’ sense of belonging. The SLIC area refers to the spaces on the 3rd floor of the Student Life Pavilion. In this context, sense of belonging refers to the extent to which one feels accepted, respected, included, supported, at home, and at ease within the space.

This interview/focus group will take approximately 90 minutes. Before we begin, you will need to review and sign a consent form. If you have any questions about the research prior to signing the form, I am happy to answer them. You are not required to sign the form or participate in this research. After you sign the form you can still opt out at any time. (Distribute form and have student fill out the form). I’m also happy to answer any questions you have at this time.

Introductory questions
1. What are the first things that come to mind when you think of the SLIC?
2. How much time do you spend in the SLIC per week on average?
3. When do you primarily spend time in the SLIC? (Morning, afternoon, night). Why do you choose to spend time in the space during the time selected?
4. What parts of the SLIC space do you typically use?

Questions regarding feelings toward the SLIC space and other spaces
5. How do you feel when you enter the SLIC space?
6. Do you feel like you belong in the SLIC space? How does the layout of the SLIC space influence your sense of belonging?
7. How do the areas housed within the SLIC (Changemaker Hub, Associated Students offices, student org spaces) impact your sense of belonging in the space?
8. What aspects of the SLIC space can be improved to better serve your needs?

Questions regarding staff in the SLIC space
9. Do you like having professional staff in the SLIC space? Why or why not?
10. Do you like having student staff in the SLIC space? Why or why not?
Thank you for taking part in this survey which seeks to understand how the Student Leadership, Involvement, and Changemaking (SLIC) spaces influence students’ sense of belonging. The SLIC area refers to the spaces on the 3rd floor of the Student Life Pavilion.

In this context, sense of belonging refers to the extent to which one feels accepted, respected, included, supported, at home, and at ease within the space. This survey will take approximately 15 minutes. Please answer all questions honestly and thoughtfully. Your responses will be kept confidential.

1. To what extent do you feel accepted, respected, included, supported, at home, and at ease when visiting the 3rd floor of the SLP?

I do not feel accepted, respected, included, supported, at home, and at ease.

1 2 3 4 5

I feel very accepted, respected, included, supported, at home, and at ease.

2. Please select the desk formation that you would prefer to see in the SLIC for general student use.

- Clustered Desks
- Individual Work Areas
3. Please select that couch formation that you would prefer to see in the SLIC for general student use.
- Grouped Seating Areas
- Individual Clustered Seating Areas

- Other: _______________________

4. Please explain why you selected your response to the question above.

5. Please select the type of artwork you would like to see hanging on the walls in the space.

- Pictures of Events
- Pictures of Students
6. Please explain why you selected your response to the question above.
7. How does the courtyard area impact your sense of belonging in the SLIC? In this context, sense of belonging refers to the extent that you feel accepted, respected, included, supported, at home, and at ease in the space.

- Increases my sense of belonging
- Decreases my sense of belonging
- Does not impact my sense of belonging

8. Please explain why you selected your response to the question above

9. How does the student leader cubicle area impact your sense of belonging in the SLIC?

- Increases my sense of belonging
- Decreases my sense of belonging
- Does not impact my sense of belonging
10. Please explain why you selected your response to the question above.

11. How does the graduate student staff cubicle area impact your sense of belonging in the SLIC?
- Increases my sense of belonging
- Decreases my sense of belonging
- Does not impact my sense of belonging

12. Please explain why you selected your response to the question above.

13. How does the professional staff open work space impact your sense of belonging in the SLIC?
14. Please explain why you selected your response to the question above.

15. How does the open computer work space impact your sense of belonging in the SLIC?

16. Please explain why you selected your response to the question above.

17. How does the Creative Zone impact your sense of belonging in the SLIC?
18. Please explain why you selected your response to the question above.

19. How does the Changemaker Hub impact your sense of belonging in the SLIC?

20. Please explain why you selected your response to the question above.

21. How do the offices housed in the SLIC impact your sense of belonging in the space? (Ex: AS/TPB Offices, Changemaker Hub, Fraternity and Sorority Life, Student Organizations, etc.)

22. Please respond to the following prompts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I can easily navigate the different spaces in the SLIC</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The signage in the SLIC provides clear information regarding the spaces</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>I like the lighting in the SLIC</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The temperature in the SLIC is comfortable</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The furniture in the SLIC is comfortable

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I'm easily able to convert the SLIC space to meet my needs (Ex: Moving the tables, chairs, couches, etc.) | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| I feel like I can "own" the space to use it in ways that best meet my needs | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| The SLIC hours meet my needs (Hours: 9am-11pm Daily) | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| The SLIC professional staff are available at times that meet my needs (Hours: 9am-5pm, Monday-Friday) | | | | | |
| | | | | | |
| The Creative Zone hours meet my needs (Hours: 10am-5pm, Monday-Friday) | | | | | |

23. Please explain why you selected your responses to the questions above.

24. Do you need additional resources in the SLIC to better serve your needs? (Ex: More whiteboards, tables, chairs, etc. - Be creative!)

25. Do you have any other suggestions for changing the physical aspects of the 3rd floor of the SLP?