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# The Action is Listening: Undergraduate Women of Color & Sense of Belonging at USD

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**The Action is Listening:**

**Undergraduate Women of Color & Sense of Belonging at the University of San Diego**

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MA Higher Education Leadership

School of Leadership Studies

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### **Abstract**

At the intersection of gender and race, women of color (WOC) often lack holistic support in navigating their undergraduate experience at the University of San Diego (USD). My purpose in this action research was to understand how Women of Color define, experience, and navigate their sense of academic, social, and cultural belonging at USD beyond the data. Consisting of three cycles, this research asked participants to define each sense of belonging followed by an individual interview to share how they have experienced their own definition of belonging at USD. The last cycle of this research was an opportunity for participants to meet each other and have an open discussion to share their USD experiences. At the end of this research, recommendations on how to build a more holistic sense of belonging for women of color are also directly provided from both participants and researcher observation.

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## Introduction

As a graduate assistant in the Women's Commons at the University of San Diego I support the Division of Student Affairs' mission and vision by inviting "students to find voice, develop skills for transformation and understand who they are called to be." (University of San Diego, 2020). Specifically, as a first-generation woman of color in higher education I can enhance the sense of belonging for undergraduate women of color in our spaces and programming. The lens and experiences I bring allow me to understand the world differently and speak from a marginalized background that can be more relatable to women of color.

Reflecting on my undergraduate experience at a medium size university in the Midwest, I lacked involvement with my own Women's Center. The first time I engaged in a program coordinated by the Women's Center was during my last semester and it was to participate in a women of color discussion group. Like the Be You: Women of Color Discussion Groups hosted by the Women's Commons, this dialogue was open to all students and professional staff. It was a space I did not realize I needed. For the first time, I felt affirmed in my experiences as a woman of color, both academically and personally. Even though I had not fully processed my on-campus or personal experiences thus far, my story was still welcomed and I was allowed to have dynamic feelings. For the first time, I was sharing my story without feeling like a spokesperson for my intersecting identities, I could be my full and authentic self. Through listening, I was empowered by other women of color who vulnerably shared their feelings and ideas. Listening to their stories propelled me to begin reflecting more deeply on who I was, who I am in relationship to others, and how was I showing up as leader. Remembering this experience, I wanted to know if undergraduate women of color at USD also experience similar feelings as I did. If similar

feelings exist, I wanted to know what I can do to engage and connect with them to affirm their undergraduate and personal experiences.

Moreover, my undergraduate sense of belonging was deeply anchored in the Hmong Student Organization and with staff in Multicultural Student Services. However, my academic and overall sense of belonging to campus was relatively low. I was unable to build connections with my professors and peers from my academic program despite our average classroom size of 25 students. Moving to San Diego, I assumed students of color would feel a stronger sense of belonging in all areas of belonging since California is the most racially diverse state in the US. Within a few months of interaction with undergraduate women of color, I realized how similar their experiences at USD resonated with my own. Many felt a social sense of belonging in student organizations and clubs but struggled to feel belonging in their classes, academic department, and larger campus community.

Leading with the values of community and collaboration, it is critical for me to bring the stories and voices of women of color to the forefront of our collective efforts in building a stronger and more inclusive campus. In working with any community, it is critical to involve its members in the diagnose process and ask them how changes and transformation should be implemented. This process is more empowering and avoids a savior complex. In sharing their stories, I asked myself why they continue to feel invisible on campus when they are a growing student population and how can I honor their uniquely lived experiences while bringing them together to project one larger voice.

The purpose of my study is to understand the experiences of undergraduate women of color in more depth and in this process empower them in their identity and experiences. My research questions ask how undergraduate women of color are experiencing USD academically,

socially, and culturally through their intersecting identities and how I could enhance USD's continuous efforts to build a more holistic support system. Through this action research I also provide recommendations on how to build a more holistic sense of belonging for undergraduate women of color. These recommendations are directly provided by participants and through my own observations.

### **Literature Review**

Existing research and data on undergraduate students of color and their sense of belonging is often put into one collective narrative and data is not disaggregated. This approach fails to highlight the uniquely lived experiences of different racial groups and the intersection of gender identity. In continuing do to research like this, society perpetually assume all students of color have the same collegiate experience. We also fail to recognize where and how equitable space needs to be created for different intersecting identities. With my own intersecting identities as a Hmong-Woman, I knew I wanted to focus my research on women of color, specifically undergraduate students at a predominately white institution. With themes, existing framework, and guidance found in these articles, I specifically focus on women of color to begin disaggregating student experiences. Themes include sense of belonging (Bamford & Pollard, 2018; Cook-Sather, Des-Ogugua & Bahti, 2017; Gummadam, Pittman & Ioffe, 2016; Museus, Yi & Saelua, 2018;), empowerment through sharing and storytelling (Booker, 2016; Rodriguez, 2010), and suggestions on how institutions can build more inclusive spaces (Boettcher, Earnest, Eason & Lewis, 2019; Museus, Lam, Huang, Kem & Tan, 2012; Kezar, 2012).

### **Sense of Belonging**

Data gathered through varying methods showed significant differences in how students of color experience college in comparison to their white peers. In defining "culture", students of

color and white students often understand the word differently, and as a result, we can have contrasting experiences (Museus, et al., 2018). For instance, white students identify culture outside of racial identification such athletic communities, military communities, or queer communities. Even in spaces created for students of color, they can feel isolated and constrained because they lack affirmation in their identities and experiences (Cook-Sather et al., 2017). In measuring sense of belonging it is important to break-down different areas of belonging to understand how students are defining their experiences. For example, it may be more important for students of color to feel a sense of belonging to the campus community rather than their own racial or ethnic group (Gummadam, et al., 2016). Or, students may feel more belonging to their social sphere than they do in their academic sphere (Museus, et al., 2012).

My research primarily focused on the intersections of race and gender because within the experiences of students of color, there are significant differences in how women and men navigate campus. With a closer examination in how African American women experience belonging in the classroom, four main themes on approachability to faculty, authentic instruction, spokesperson pressure, and microaggressions from their peers arose as key factors in their academic belonging (Booker, 2016). Students have a stronger sense of academic belonging to both their program and classroom when they can engage in a more “active” learning environment. An active learning environment would include collaborative work or cooperative learning and exchanging as a classroom (Meeuwisse, et al., 2010). However, this sense of academic belonging does not always correlate to a student of color’s sense of campus belonging or even play a role (Meeuwisse, et al., 2010).

### **Empowerment through sharing & storytelling**



Using the approach of storytelling, Rodriguez (2010) created a space for Latina Women to share their experiences but also validated and affirmed them. In their storytelling they build a sense of community, challenge the dominate narrative through counter narratives, and teach others how to make meaning of their own story (Rodriguez, 2010). Booker further models this in their research as well (2016). As their research concluded, participants expressed gratitude in being able to share space with their peers who were experiencing similar feelings in the classroom. This gratitude demonstrates the desire from women of color to continue building their counter stories so they can also have a stronger sense of their identity and persist in predominately white spaces.

### **Inclusive Spaces**

For institutions to create a better support system and sense of belonging for students of color, they must build a collective and holistic community (Museus, et al., 2018). To create a program or space and ensure its longevity, it is crucial to include formal leadership. In a “bottom-up leadership” approach, institutional leaders would work more closely with those who have face to face interaction with students (Kezar, 2012). Particularly within the residential halls, there is an opportunity to create a significant impact in building this community since USD has a first- and second-year requirement to live on campus. To create this space in the residential halls, it is important to not only hire more diverse community advisors but also involve white professionals and students in the conversation (Boettcher, Earnest, Eason & Lewis, 2019). In being able to build a connection with their roommates, residential hall professionals, and custodial staff, students of color were more prepared for their interactions with the larger campus community (Boettcher, et al., 2019).

Lastly, it is important to bring the voices of marginalized student populations to the forefront of the conversation and encourage more vocal engagement between students, faculty, and administration. Institutions must begin normalizing the opportunity for students of color to engage with faculty and staff so their stories and experiences can be integrated and heard in the classroom, curriculum, and community. (Museus, et al., 2012).

### **Undergraduate Women of Color at USD**

USD's overall undergraduate student enrollment for Fall 2019 was 5,919 with 56% identifying as women and 44% identifying as men. Racially and ethnically, 38% of the student body identifies as a student of color. This racial demographic includes Hispanic or Latino (21%), Asian (7%), Black and African American (3%), and Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (0.3%), and two or more races (7%) (USD Federal Report). USD's disaggregated data about undergraduate women of color is not publicly available for view.,

In the Women's Commons there are three programs hosted by our space specifically for undergraduate women of color: Womxn of Color Summit, EMPOWER Retreat, and the Womxn of Color Discussion Group. The Womxn of Color Summit was originally advocated for and organized by a previous student assistant in the Women's Commons. They wanted to have an opportunity to connect with all women of color across campus. Hosted every fall semester, the summit is collectively organized by women of color and partners across campus. The EMPOWER Retreat is an opportunity for first year, sophomore, and junior year students to grow through deeper self-reflections and build their personal story. EMPOWER centers on the voices of women of color and asks participants to explore how their own race and gender identities intersect. Ultimately, the goal is for participants to become self-empowered through their own stories and empower others as well. The Womxn of Color Discussion Groups began with a

graduate assistant's action research. Meeting bi-weekly, the conversations focus on creating a space for women of color to share and explore racial, ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic differences across campus and how it affects students.

With these existing programs I want to understand more deeply if each program is meeting its purpose. If not, I want to explore with participants how we can begin to create a stronger sense of belonging in our space and how to integrate more inclusive practices. Reflecting on my two values, I want to continue building USD's community through collaboration with undergraduate women of color to understand their experiences in the classroom, social settings, and campus culture.

While collecting more information about the experiences of women of color at USD, I anticipated to have difficulty in finding participants because all undergraduates can navigate their first year of college up to graduation without having to ever experience the Women's Commons. Additionally, as the Feminist Movement often has white women at the forefront and lacks an understanding of intersectionality, women of color may have had prejudices towards our space and the support we can provide. Another challenge was the reality of COVID-19 and the significant impact it had on students' learning environment and ability to stay engaged. As students could no longer physically be on campus, I expected this to dramatically change their prior feelings of belonging and view of the university. I also anticipated the 2020 Presidential election to be another external factor that would affect overall student well-being and how they would show up as participants in my research.

### **Significance to USD**

The office of Strategic Initiatives and Programs sends a survey to all first-year students to assess their sense of belonging at four different points of the year to track where feelings and

impressions of USD begin to shift. The first survey is sent after orientation weekend and conditionally asks students what they believe their sense of belonging will be. Data gathered here shows no significant difference between undergraduate women of color and white females (OLE! Weekend Survey). The next assessment is sent after the fourth week of classes with the same set of questions but asks student how they currently feel about USD. Data found in this assessment set begins to showcase a slightly lower sense of belonging on campus for both women of color and their white peers. The statistical difference is still minor, but women of color still rank lower in their sense of belonging (Fall Transition Survey). The third assessment is sent at the end of the fall semester in early January. This third survey retains a lower response yield but begins to showcase a significant decrease in the sense of belonging in women of color in their comfort and ability to be their “real-self” (2019 FY and UD Res Midyear Survey).

I also realized the need to further assess the experiences of women of color while co-hosting our Womxn of Color Discussion Group. This discussion group was virtually hosted with an anonymous reflection activity. Participants were asked to remove their names and respond to questions in the chat for everyone to read. The first question asked, “How has my women of color identity shown up?” and though participants were not asked about a specific place or time, most shared about their experiences at USD. Their responses entailed feelings of isolation in their experiences as a woman of color and being unable to relate to their white peers in the classroom. Students also shared how they gravitated towards other women of color to build social and cultural relationships.

To secure permission and information pertaining to my research, I worked with the Director of the Gender Identity Resources for current Women’s Commons programming and the Assistant Vice President of Strategic Initiatives & Programs for university assessments and

unpublished data sets. In connecting with the Director of Gender Identity Resources I wanted to learn more about the history of the Women's Commons and its evolution as a department as more diverse students began enrolling at USD and how women of color traditionally engaged in our spaces. I wanted to learn more about the existing data and assessments the university has collected throughout the years on undergraduate women of color. USD has been making strides to provide more holistic support for students of color so I believe my research can further enhance institutional efforts.

### **External Impacts on Sense of Belonging**

While conducting this research it is important to consider the historical events that occurred throughout the research period. These historical events were beyond USD's physical campus but greatly influenced student sense of belonging because of how USD approached and addressed them. Students were challenged to navigate a virtual learning experience, while learning about anti-racism and had to prepare for the 2020 presidential election within a one-year span. By the end of the 2020, students were mentally and emotionally exhausted.

**COVID-19.** Having a two-year live-on requirement, most USD students' sense of belonging is established within this time frame and directly impacts their sense of belonging. On-campus experiences range anywhere from formal programming such as the Olé Weekend, Welcome Back Concert, or being able to have a meal with friends in the dining hall. While conducting this research, I was hyper-aware of how students' sense of belonging significantly shifted in March 2020 with the spread of COVID-19 and stay-at-home orders were placed. Within the week after spring break, all students moved off-campus and returned home. Only students within extreme cases could remain on campus until other housing could be arranged off-campus.

Since physical access to campus was no longer an option for students, any sense of belonging was significantly impacted along with their mental and emotional health. To provide remote services and gauge what support students needed, USD created Torero Connect, a team made-up of volunteer administration, staff, and graduate students who made outreach to first- and second-year students. As a Torero Connector, students shared with me the challenges of being at home and the pull of responsibilities between the expectations of their home-life and academics. Moreover, as they were processing their own emotions and the traumatic impact of a global pandemic, some students were unable to name what support looked like.

**Black Lives Matter.** As students completed their spring semester on a virtual platform, George Floyd's death in May 2020 at the hands of Minneapolis police officers ignited racial outrage across the nation. With Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests growing across the country and worldwide attention, institutions became pressured to take on official stances on the racial inequalities that plague the United States. Social media was flooded with educational content on how varying communities can be better accomplices for the Black & African American community and anti-racism become the focal point of social justice work. Though USD was no longer in academic session, students attentively waited for four days for an official statement.

The pre-existing racial tensions at USD were further exasperated and a lack of immediate action steps from USD to dismantle white supremacy frustrated students. As predominately white institution, the @BlackatUSD Instagram profile was created in July 2020 to publicly share the experiences and stories of Black students and other students of color. As the profile gained attention, a @WhiteatUSD Instagram page was created to rebut the experiences being shared and serve as a platform for racist ideology. USD denounced the Instagram profile and began investigating its origin to have the profile completely removed. In the following days, the profile

was permanently deleted but Black students, students of color, and the campus community were already angry and disheartened in how the profile could come into existence in the first place. On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, Black faculty at USD shared an open letter addressing the racial inequities within institution structures and listed actions steps that would allow USD to live up to the mission of diversity and inclusion. Following, as Fall 2020 classes began earlier than usual, the Black Student Union wrote an open letter to USD on August 29<sup>th</sup> and listed action steps towards building a more equitable campus and stronger sense of belonging. The racial battle fatigue students endured during this time and continue to endure can be expected to hold a heavy weight in their overall sense of belonging.

**2020 Presidential Elections.** Leading up to November 3<sup>rd</sup>, regardless of political affiliation, many people attentively watched the debates and news channels as they projected who would be the presidential winner. It was many students' first time participating in the presidential elections and with the impact of COVID-19 and social distancing measures, elections were organized and counted differently. Due to social distancing and safety measures, millions of mail-in ballots were still waiting to be counted after official election night and prolonged the official announcement of the presidential winner. As battleground states reported their official count to declare their electoral votes, anxiety across the nation grew. Four days later, on the morning of Saturday, November 7<sup>th</sup>, Joe Biden reached the 270 majority electoral college votes and was officially named the presidential winner. However, tensions from within the White House and country grew when Trump claimed voter fraud and refused to cede until votes were recounted. Even when the president-elect was officially named, unrest remained as the country watched the current administration challenge the voting process.

The 2020 presidential elections were unlike any other election specifically because of COVID-19 and how the current administration was unable to retain their second term. This presidential election also yielded a record voter turnout. This was a direct reflection of the key issues the presidential candidates addressed and debated on. The BLM movement and rise in anti-Asian hate crimes brought racial injustices and other related issue to the forefront of the political debates. How the presidential candidates understood these racial tensions and inequities equated to how safe Black, Indigenous, and People of Color could feel in the US. During this time USD as a community had to navigate a range of political conversations in a meaningful, productive, and respectful manner.

### **Action Research Model**

Contrary to our belief about research being unbiased, the collection process, analysis, and presentation of data is inherently linked to the researcher's own beliefs and values. Action research is unique because it acknowledges this and asks researchers to bring in their personal passions and values into the research. Action research also further asks researchers to understand their own positionality and the potential effects it could have on their research and participants. Using an action research approach allows for the researcher and participants to be dynamic and grow throughout the research process. With this, I plan to use the action-reflection methodology by McNiff and Whitehead (2011) so my research can grow and adapt alongside participants. The action-reflection method consists of five elements: observation, reflection, action, evaluation, and modification. Beginning with observation, the researcher takes notes about a specific area of concern, including questions they may have. Next, during reflection they contemplate on how they can further collect data about the area of concern or question. The action phase then calls for the research to actively gather the needed data. Action can include sending out surveys,



scheduling group interviews, or individual interviews with a specific group of participants. Once data has been collected, the researcher moves into evaluation where they review and synthesize the information. Evaluation is an analytic process that can generate common themes or reemerging ideas shared among participants, some evaluation can also present new information. With common themes, ideas, and/or new information gathered through the evaluation, researchers can then modify their next research cycle if necessary. For example, if not enough data was collected the questions in the next cycle can be changed and/or further clarification questions can be asked. Modifications can also include suggestions about how the cycle could be altered and/or improved if the research process/cycle were to be conducted again. After modification, the researcher then moves onto the next cycle and repeats the same process until they are satisfied with their findings and/or the process has become exhausted. Figure 1.1 displays a visual representation of the action-reflection cycle.

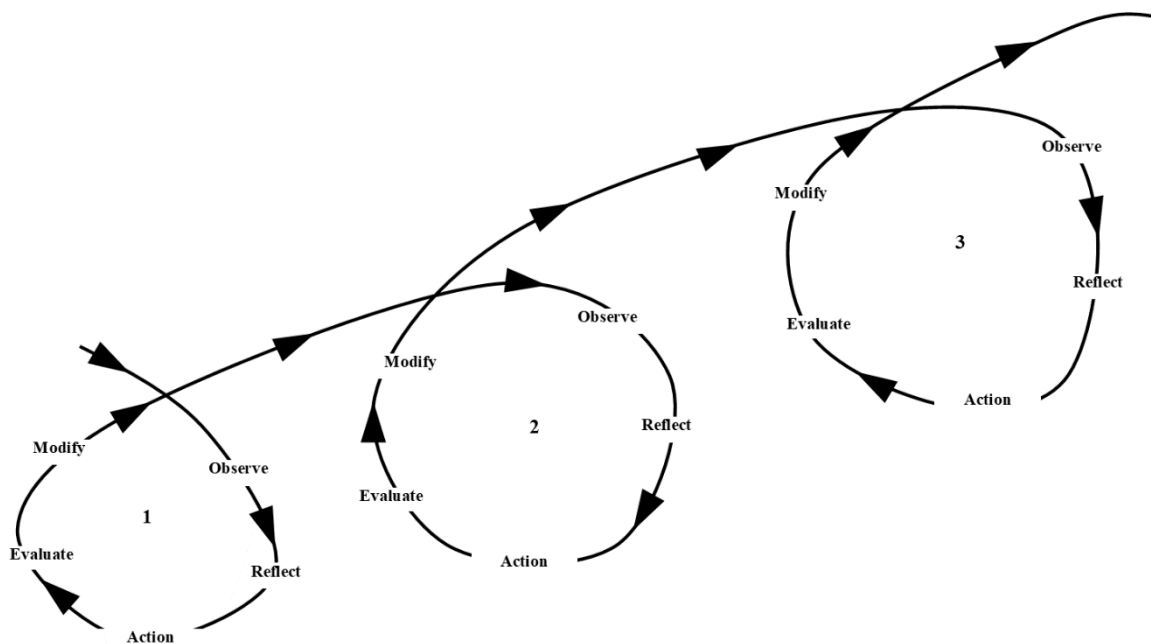


Figure 1.1

I am choosing to approach my research with the action-reflection methodology because of the linked connection between my personal values and epistemological assumptions. We all possess different ways of knowing and understanding the world. So, as we collaborate and learn from each other new collective ideas emerge. Even in changing one participant in the collaborative space, an entirely new idea will be created. The strength of using the action-reflection method is the flexibility it provides in changing and adapting my cycles with new information learned from the previous cycle or further research. I value this approach in my research because it allows the process to be as dynamic as the stories and experiences shared by woman of color. Our life experiences do not occur in silos, it is one continuous story so as we gain a new understanding and perspective, it also changes how we have made meaning of past, present, and future experiences. However, I acknowledge that this process can become overwhelming with the number of variants that can occur and change my research process in each cycle.

### **Research Cycles**

My research will include three cycles with a pre-cycle. The pre-cycle began in January 2020 and informed me in how I would ask my question and data collection through informal conversations with students and information presented at USD's Student Success Summit. I recruited participants by sending email invitation to students who identified as women of color and attended the 2019 Womxn of Color Summit, discussion groups, and/or EMPOWER Retreat 2020. I also sent email invitations to students who I engaged with in casual conversations in the Women's Commons space. Overall, 66 emails were sent and 12 who were willingly to participant. In comparison the number of emails sent this is a very small response rate, but I anticipated this because of COVID. However, I only anticipated to have 5-8 participants in my

research, so I was excited when more than 10 participants who were willing to participate despite their pre-existing academic and personal responsibilities. Once participants replied with an interest to participate, individual meetings were scheduled to provide another overview of the research process and have consent forms signed (Appendix G).

My first cycle asked participants to reflect on their identity and served as a self-exploration activity. They were given a journal with questions and could answer in any format that best expressed their response. The purpose of this first cycle was to have participants begin analyzing their own identity as a woman of color and how it has shown up in varying spaces. This cycle allowed participants to reflect at a pace that was comfortable for themselves before their individual interviews. A reflective journal offered the opportunity for deeper reflection and breaking down “sense of belonging” into three spheres (academic, social, cultural) that made up the overall feeling. This allowed me to gain deeper insight into their individual identity development and how they viewed themselves at USD. With a set deadline date for journals to be returned to me, I reviewed and synthesized what was shared and adapted my second cycle to issues identified in the journals.

The second cycle was individual interviews with participants to further reflect and build on what was shared in their journals. I wanted this second cycle to help participants build a story around their identities and their experiences. The purpose of this second cycle was to have participants verbally share their experiences and hear themselves express their own sense of belonging. I anticipated that this would be the first-time some participants had reflected on their identities and/or experiences at USD. With honesty and vulnerability, I wanted them to become empowered by their own narrative so they could openly share with other participants in the third cycle.

Based on integrated information from the second cycle interviews, the third cycle was a group discussion with all participants. As the facilitator of this space, I first asked participants to share their stories with other individuals. After, I asked each pairing to identify common themes they heard in each of their stories. The purpose of this cycle was to have participants directly share what themes of belonging they identified as most important to their sense of belonging and experiences at USD. Moreover, I wanted them to diagnose what further efforts from USD are still needed to build a stronger sense of belonging. As a group, our final task was to reflect on how this research process impacted us and how we plan to continue building our narratives.

I specifically asked participants to share themes and action steps because I wanted them to own their narratives. Research on marginalized communities often yield a deficit perspective and fail to recognize the existing volume of their voices and resiliency. I do not want to further perpetuate a “savior-complex” through research. Instead, my research will serve as a platform to amplify the voices undergraduate women of color and bring them to the forefront of USD’s existing efforts to enhance students’ sense of belonging.

### **Participants: Salient Identities**

Although being a woman of color was one salient identity participants had to self-identify with, I wanted to create a process that allowed them to participate as their whole selves. The identity of being a woman of color does not operate in a silo without the influence of other identities. I wanted to create a research process that allowed women of color to name their own identities rather than assigning them to check-boxes. The check-box approach denies them of other salient identities that may hold a critical role in how they understand and navigate campus. This approach may also force individuals to identify within a racial monolith that erases them of

their ethnic identities and experiences. If participants did not include their racial and/or ethnic identities, this is also data in how participants have been socialized or encouraged to identify.

Following below are the demographic information of the 12 participants for this research.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Minor</b>	<b>Salient Identities</b>
<b>Camila</b>	Junior	Psychology	Sociology	Woman
<b>Dej</b>	Sophomore	Environmental Studies	Business Administration	First-generation student, women of color, environmentalist
<b>Marisa</b>	Senior	Finance	Political Science	Black, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied
<b>Idra</b>	Sophomore	Psychology	--	Mixed-Asian, queer, woman, Canadian, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender, education, non-religious
<b>Nina</b>	Senior (Transfer)	Psychology	Biology & Spanish	Race, gender, economic class
<b>Brandy</b>	Senior	Marketing	Business Analytics	African/Caribbean American, Woman, daughter, sister, friend, artist
<b>Sol</b>	Senior (Transfer)	Political Science	--	Resilience
<b>Lucy</b>	Senior	Finance & Ethnic Studies	--	Woman, Vietnamese-American, first-generation student, gay
<b>Evie</b>	First-year	Communications (Intended)	Visual Arts (Intended)	Middle Eastern, Woman
<b>Nali</b>	Sophomore	English & Political Science	Classical Studies	Nationality, multi-racial/ethnic background, gender, sexuality, age
<b>Umme</b>	Junior	Ethnic Studies	Political Science	Pakistani, Muslim, bi-sexual, woman
<b>Celeste</b>	Junior	Communication	Film & Sociology	Woman, Latinx blood of Mexican & Salvadorian, sister, daughter, first-generation American & student, heterosexuality, white-passing, US citizen, middle-class

### **Cycle 1: Reflection**

**Observe.** While searching for graduate programs, I knew I wanted my research to center the voices of women of color. When I was offered the graduate assistant position in the Women's Commons, the overall goal of my research was further solidified and affirmed by my director and the space. All four of our student assistants identified as a woman of color and had at least one-year of an on-campus experience. Living the entirety of my life in the Midwest, I was eager

to hear the student experience in San Diego. However, as students become comfortable with me and began sharing about the challenges of navigating a predominately white institution, I found similarities between our student experiences. Furthermore, when I participated, coordinated, or facilitated programming for diverse student populations, I heard similar themes being echoed. Many students of color found their strongest sense of belonging within cultural clubs, organizations, and spaces. If they were unable to find a place of belonging, they would have to create this space for themselves. Furthermore, the strongest sense of belonging students of color felt was when they were able to vulnerably share about the setbacks they experienced at USD and receive affirmations and/or support from their peers.

I conducted my first cycle as a reflective journal because I wanted to build an intentional opportunity for participants to reflect on their sense of belonging. I provided prompts asking them to define three areas of belonging: social, academic, and culture. Since belonging feels and looks different for everyone, I asked participants to define the three areas of belonging in their own words. Additionally, I wanted participants to begin reflecting on the entirety of their USD experience before beginning their individual interviews.

**Reflect.** Beginning in February 2021, I met with each participant via Zoom to reintroduce my research to them and answer any questions they may have. As I asked simple check-in questions, they were already beginning to share with me how their current sense of belonging at USD was impacted by a virtual college experience. Participants in this research were student assistants I previously supervised in the Women's Commons or met through the EMPOWER Retreat, Womxn of Color Summit and/or the Be You: Women of Color Discussion Group. While meeting with each of them they expressed gratitude in being invited to participate and be included in my research.

Participants were also asked to write a letter to themselves that would be shared with them again after the last research cycle. The purpose of this activity is to help them regroup themselves as they finish the academic year and continue moving forward in their academic or professional careers. The activity does not hold any research data for collection, instead, it is a pure moment for participants to reflect on themselves. I included this mindfulness activity because I wanted participants to recognize their own accomplishments and perseverance as women of color.

**Act.** Participants were provided the journal prompts through a Google Form. Since this first cycle was a reflective journal they completed on their own, I did not get to witness how participants interacted with the prompts until they were submitted. I prefaced each participant to spend 30-45 minutes maximum on the reflective journal and how their responses should reflect their individual experience. I also wanted to be mindful of their capacity to participate in my research in addition to their academic work so I asked them to set the date in which they would be able to submit their journals to me.

**Evaluate.** To synthesize the data collected in this cycle, while I read each participant's response, I noted themes that repeatedly appeared. I also highlighted responses that were unique so I could showcase a wider range of belonging being experienced at USD. Key themes were selected based on literature review and pre-cycle observations. Each response provided me with better insight and understanding in how undergraduate women of color defined what social, academic, and cultural sense of belonging at USD looked and felt like.

**Modify.** Upon reading each response, I realized that I would need to ask additional clarifying questions for some participants during their interview cycle. Some responses did not have as much depth as others while others were already sharing their experiences and stories about their

current sense of belonging. Furthermore, instead of providing their own definition of belonging, some participants shared what they saw and perceived belonging to be at USD. How each response varied in their depth showcased to me the need to reformat the questions and provide more prefacing information for participants.

### **Cycle 2: Storytelling**

**Observe.** Once participants submitted their responses to the journal prompts, I scheduled their individual interview. All 12 participants returned to this cycle of the research because I had prefaced this next step with them during our first meeting. The purpose of this one on one interview was to better understand the experience of belonging for women of color and how it compared to their definition. Each interview question asked about a specific area of belonging and how they experienced their own definition of belonging at USD.

**Reflect.** I wanted the interviews to feel more conversational so participants could openly share their experiences and feel heard. Through pre-cycle data collection and observations, I noticed how willing women of color were in sharing their honest experience of USD when asked. I wanted this cycle to honor each participants' experience of belonging at USD. To create this space, I knew I would have to build a rapport with participants through casual conversations.

**Act.** Each interview was scheduled for an hour long and recorded through Zoom. Before their interviews began, they were reminded of their consent to be record and their identities would remain anonymous. Participants were able to quickly draw up memories of how and where they experienced their definition of belonging. If they could not recall a moment or experience that could speak to their definition of belonging, they openly shared that with me too. Everyone was thoroughly engaged in the interview and provided detailed stories along with recommendations on how USD could create a more holistic sense of belonging for women of color.



**Evaluate.** Like the previous cycle, based on what has already been gathered from previous research, I listened to participant recorded interviews again and noted common themes along with other experiences that stood out to me. I also listened for key themes gathered from the journal prompts. If participants did experience their definition of belonging at USD, I noted what specifically contributed to this. Each interview was also transcribed using an online application to provide more accurate quotes and visually allow me to see repeated keywords and phrases, this was how new themes of belonging were gathered. Likewise, if they have been unable to experience an area of belonging at USD, I further asked what USD and/or additional resources could be provided do to better support them.

**Modify.** After this cycle I looked forward to hosting the group discussion because everyone had shared their experiences so openly and honestly. Since I was able to ask clarifying questions for participants in this cycle about their journal responses, I did not have any further questions after their interviews. The only modification I made for cycle three was dividing participants into three smaller groups to ensure that everyone who wanted to share had enough airtime and keep the virtual space more close-knit. I had also began contemplating how I could gather data through my questions and still facilitate a meaningful conversation between participants.

### **Cycle 3: Affirmations**

**Observe.** While facilitating the Be You: Women of Color Discussion Group I was able to gain skills as a facilitator and build a safer and brave space for students to share their experiences. When women of color had the opportunity to share their experiences in this space, the action of being able to share was validation. Moreover, when other participants in the space responded with an affirmation or shared a similar experience, the virtual space began to feel more natural. Using the first two cycles as building blocks to the last cycle, I wanted participants to feel more

comfortable and confident and sharing their story with others. Thus, I wanted to recreate this environment for my research participants too.

**Reflect.** I intentionally set this last cycle to be a group discussion and have other participants meet each other because I wanted them to have an opportunity to connect with other women of color. In a post-pandemic environment and as participants feel comfortable, I hope they will be able to further build connections in-person. Lastly, when an individual listens to another story that is like their own it can be validating and affirming.

**Act.** Once participants finished their interviews, they provided me with their general weekly availability so I could coordinate a date and time for the discussion groups. Arranging everyone's schedules proved to be a challenge and four participants did not attend the group discussion due to conflicts with their own personal schedule. Group discussions were also recorded through Zoom and participants were aware of when recorded began and ended. Each group discussion was rich and began to have a natural flow as we became more familiar with each other. To help the space feel less formal I asked participants to leave themselves unmuted if they felt comfortable so they could speak and naturally react to whatever was being shared. I started the space with introductions followed by a jam board activity so participants could ease into the conversations more easily.

**Evaluate.** To collect data from this final cycle I used an inductive approach guided by themes from the first and second cycle. During this last cycle I was specifically seeking to see if participants named the same themes I observed. I did not share my own observations or the emerging themes I found throughout the research process with the group before asking them to share their own thoughts. If new themes emerged during our group discussion, I noted them. Overall, the data collection in this cycle was intentionally not created to collect new data.

Instead, I wanted the space to affirm the themes I observed from the previous two cycles and for it to be community oriented for participants to share their stories and experiences openly.

**Modify.** Though this was my last cycle I would repeat it again so all participants could attend. I believe the lack of attendance is a result of conflicted timing in the academic school year, students were preparing for their midterms and/or completing other course work. If I could host this cycle again, I would arrange for it to be in the summer or early fall before courses begin again. The alternative timing of this cycle could alter how students respond since they are not actively in classes and may be less stressed.

## **Findings**

### **Overall Belonging at USD**

While reading the definitions of belonging from each participant, there was a common theme of being able to find people and spaces for them to be their full authentic selves. This definition fits in with the traditional understanding of a sense of belonging, however there was an added layer of finding racial and/or cultural belonging for women of color. Some participants shared how belonging meant being able to engage in authentic conversations with faculty, staff, and their peers. Authentic conversations were further defined as being able to relate to others' or at least share similarities on a personal and/or cultural level. Other responses mentioned how belonging was being able to build relationships and/or a community that brought them comfort and could call a "home away from home." Comfort was defined as relationships and/or varying spaces one could build with others to openly share and ask for advice on personal and academic concerns.

Participants also mentioned how building this overall sense of belonging at USD is challenging to find and/or create because it is a predominately white institution and they did not

fit the description of a “typical USD student.” During the interviews there was also a shared sentiment about the amount of effort one had to put forth to find this sense of belonging in comparison to their white peers. When they were able to find their community of belonging, even if it could only be found in specific areas of campus, they were able to continue at USD because they could share their experiences and lean on one another for support.

### **Academic Belonging**

Within the classroom, professors and instructors had the largest influence in how women of color experienced their sense of belonging. Participants who had a stronger sense of academic belonging credited this to their professors and instructors who were personable and able to engage in difficult conversations in the classroom. These professors and instructors also brought in different viewpoints and challenged students to be more critical. Participants who visited their professors or instructors during their office hours felt more comfortable to do so because they could relate to them on a more personal level. Some of these professors or instructors also shared similar identities and/or backgrounds as the participants. Regarding their classmates, some participants cited the negative influence they had on their academic sense of belonging. They often felt excluded from conversations and group projects as one of the few, if not the only, women/student of color in the class. Others found it challenging, uncomfortable, or unsafe to engage with their classmates due to differing viewpoints.

Access to academic resources were also important in building an academic sense of belonging. Marisa defined academic belonging as, “being in a major you’re truly interested in and connecting with your professors and fellow classmates ... belonging also entails feeling comfortable enough to speak up during classes and going to office hours.” For many participants, being able to build connections with their professors and classmates was important because they

would be able to reach out and ask questions or for other academic support. In addition to their professors and classmates, participants shared how academic support services, such as Student Support Services (SSS) and tutoring helped them to be more confident in the classroom. These resources are important because Lucy expressed how most of their peers had “countless resources that have helped them into their current positions, yet in class [were expected to] stand on an equal playing field.” Moreover, the community within the academic support services also help build a sense of belonging. Brandy shared their experience by stating:

“In addition to tangible academic resources, SSS is also a great community. We often gather in the center for different events or just hanging out doing homework together. This all was huge for me, especially having a group of students that I can relate to, specifically with our academic life. I think it is so important for students of all different backgrounds and identities to get the support they need, which aids in the sense of academic belonging at USD.”

Within the classroom Umme shares how, “... [an] academic sense of belonging is the ability to see yourself in the material covered. As a woman of color, I feel like I belong when the material we cover reflects and represents me and my experiences, in a non-Eurocentric way.” As an Ethnic Studies major, Umme further expressed how they feel fortunate to be part of the department because course materials and reading often center on the intellect of People of Color, especially women.

### **Social & Cultural Belonging**

Ultimately, these two areas of belonging always co-exist together, many women of color viewed these to be very similar if not identical in their definition and experiences. Having a social sense of belonging meant having a cultural sense of belonging and vice versa. Being in community

with others who could understand and relate to them personally and their experiences at USD. Not being able to fit the “stereotypical USD student” challenged participants to find their own niche communities. If they were unable to find a place of belonging within multicultural student clubs or organizations, they would create one by themselves and continue to grow their own community. However, in being the pioneer of these spaces, some women of color found it to be tiring and disheartening because the work and labor to create this space fell back on them. To increase a social and cultural sense of belonging for women of color, many shared how they would like to see USD be more proactive than reactive in their initiatives and programming around diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Nina defined a social sense of belonging as, “feeling like you could confront peers without a sense of judgment, being understood by those around you of both similar and different backgrounds, and being able to build connections with those around you with a sense of respect and understanding.” A similar definition was also shared by Nali, “social belonging should be about inclusivity, meaning no matter what identities someone holds, they can be themselves and be/feel welcome on campus.”

Conversely, some participants did not share their definition of what social belonging at USD felt or looked like. Alternatively, they shared who they believed would be able to find the greatest sense of social and cultural belonging at USD. Lucy expressed how it was difficult to define a social sense of belonging and instead shared how those who are “white have blonde hair and [are involved] with Greek life” are more likely to build a stronger sense of social belonging. Evie also shared how they believed “if you're white and upper middle class and above you'll feel great at USD.” For social belonging, socioeconomic wealth was introduced as a factor that effected some participants relatability to their peers. Camila shared their experience:

“I feel like I have met so many people that are incredibly rich and live lifestyles that are very different from my own ... I think a big part of increasing a social sense of belonging at USD would be increasing diversity. I really wish that there were more people of color who come from backgrounds similar to mine. A community like this would take away some of the superficial pressure I feel at USD to look really put together all the time and to be able to relate to extravagant lifestyles.”

When specifically sharing their definition of a cultural sense of belonging, participants stated how being able to find others not only shared similar identity(ies) or cultures but also values. Nina defined their cultural sense of belonging as, “having peers that come from similar racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds as you, and having peers that hold similar values.” Being in environments that foster authentic connections in a cross-cultural context was another important element in Dej’s and Brandy’s sense cultural belonging. The communities that helped to build a cultural sense of belonging included the Black Student Union, The Commons, and other cultural student organizations. Specifically, these communities and spaces built a cultural sense of belonging because they hosted open dialogues for students to share their USD experience.

However, to find these spaces there was shared sentiment among some participants about the additional effort women of color must put forward to find their cultural sense of belonging. Marisa shared their experience:

“I rarely see other black students in my classes or walking on campus, so I had to make a special effort to join cultural groups and find these connections outside of the classrooms and dorms. If you put effort into seeking out a cultural connection on campus you can

experience a sense of belonging, but you won't find it easily without doing a lot of work on your own."

In contrast, Idra shared their experience and having a lack of a cultural sense of belonging because of their intersecting identities. The closest sense of cultural belonging they found was with People of the Islands (POI) because there were other mix-Asian students who they could relate to. Other participants further expressed how even though they were surrounded by a group of friends and people around them were friendly, they continue to feel isolated and are unable to relate to them or build authentic connections.

### **Recommendations: Creating Holistic Belonging for Women of Color**

As an institution, the pathways to begin transforming the campus community to be holistically inclusive and increase a sense of belonging for undergraduate women of color are present and possible. One of the outcomes for this research was to better understand the sense of belonging of undergraduate women of color beyond the data and recognize how change can be implemented in varying areas to build a more holistic sense of belonging. Following are recommendations I have gathered from participants and through personal observations.

### **Intuitional Investment in the Women's Commons & The Commons**

Institutionally, it is critical to continue investing in the Women's Commons programming and space. All the participants in this research have interacted with the Women's Commons at least once if not frequently. Programming from the Women's Commons to highlight and continue funding are the EMPOWER Retreat and Womxn of Color Summit. Nali and Nina emphasized how the EMPOWER Retreat helped to validate their own life experiences and broaden their own understanding of others'. They also shared how being able to connect with students from different backgrounds, graduate students, and other professional staff helped them



to feel more belonging when they returned to campus. Another Women's Commons program that has helped build a stronger sense of belonging for women of color is the Womxn of Color Summit. Like the EMPOWER Retreat, because the summit focuses on the story's experiences, and well-being of women of color, attendees feel safer and brave to engage in conversations. Being able to sit in physical space with other women of color also helps in building connection with other women of color on campus. The Womxn of Color Summit allows students, faculty, and professional staff to engage with one another in a less formal setting and in a different capacity.

Investing in the physical space is also crucial in increasing sense of belonging for women of color. The physical space is often one of the few areas on campus for women of color to casually gather and feel comfortable. Moreover, as previous student assistants in the Women's commons, Marisa, Umme, and Camila shared how they enjoyed being in the space even after their work shift ended. The environment felt safer and more comfortable because the individuals who most often utilized the space were racially diverse. Other participants would frequently visit the space too because they knew they would be able to find their friends there to study or have casual conversations. The physical proximity the Women's Commons has to the Black Student Resource Commons (BSRC), United Multicultural Front Commons (UFMC), and LGBTQ+ & Allies also aids in how women of color experience social and cultural belonging. Being able to see the other spaces brings more awareness about other available resources and build new connections with students from similar and different backgrounds.

### **Safer & Braver Classrooms**

To build a stronger sense of academic belonging for women of color in the classroom it is important for them to be able to connect with their professors and instructors. To create this

sense of comfort, professors and instructors can build in intentional time at the beginning of the semester that allows the class to interact with each other. These interactions help students to become more familiar with each other more and allow them to reach out for help if needed in the future. Being personable is also critical in building an academic sense of belonging. When women of color can relate and/or trust their professors they feel more confident in the classroom and throughout their academic career. Personability can range and can be as simple as sending out an email to a student to refer them to a program, organization, or scholarship they would be a good match for based on their work. When they are recognized by their professors or instructors, they feel seen and not as marginalized within the classroom. Additionally, I would recommend professors and instructors to review their course materials and integrate more diverse authors and scholars. When women of color can see themselves in the research and materials, they become more engaged in the course work because they can relate to it.

I would also recommend for professors and instructors to have skills in intervening and facilitating difficult conversations. When microaggressions go unaddressed in the classroom, women of color became less engaged because they do not feel safe to express their ideas and thoughts. Being able to build a faculty body that can facilitate difficult conversations would require further trainings and be an added responsibility, however, it is important for the entirety of the class. When students can participate in critical and productive conversations surrounding race, diversity, equity, and inclusion, everyone benefits.

Lastly, there continues to be need for financial investment and expanding academic resources such as tutoring and programs like SSS. Not only are these resources valuable in course performance but also building an academic community for women of color. When accessibility to these resources are readily available and visible, confidence and belonging in

their classes and program increases. Even if they are unable to connect with other students in their classroom, being able to meet other students who have already taken the course to help them navigate it aids in building academic perseverance.

### **Increase Support for Multicultural Student Clubs and Organizations**

Student clubs and organizations hold a critical role in how women of color experience both their social and cultural sense of belonging at USD. Many participants cited how multicultural student clubs and organizations became their safer and braver community to be their authentic selves. Investing both time and financial resources into cultural programming and events has helped undergraduate women of color to become more involved on campus and step into student leadership positions. When they can build an affinity to a student club or organization, their social and cultural sense of belonging increases because they are more likely to be surrounded by like-minded students. Being with other like-minded students allows them to be in a space where they can more easily relate to others and not always have to explain themselves and/or their experiences. Moreover, when multicultural events or programs, such as Multicultural Night hosted by the UFMC, women of color feel more seen in their experiences and supported by the institution.

Increasing support for multicultural student organizations and clubs is also crucial for student retention. Some participants shared how they heavily considered transferring during their first year but ultimately decided to stay when they were able to connect with other students through multicultural student clubs and organizations. Many of the student leaders in these clubs and organizations also hold an important role in student retention. Being able to meet an upper-division student helped lower-division students to persevere because they could see students who looked like them or shared similar backgrounds succeeding.

## **Data Collection**

To continue understanding the sense of belonging undergraduate women of color are experiencing at USD and transform the campus community it is important to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data gathered through the first-year experience survey already showcased to USD how sense of belonging from women of color decreased towards the end of their first year. However, USD lacked data on why their of sense of belonging decreased and how this could be addressed through institutional changes. The qualitative data gathered through this research brought more exposure to the experiences and stories of undergraduate women of color along with actionable steps on how to build and support a more holistic sense of belonging. Future data that is collected should also be racially specific because the women of color experience is not a monolith. Each persons' intersectionality affects their personal experiences and how they navigate varying spaces. If we can understand undergraduate women of color sense of belonging from both micro and macro experiences, institutional and front-line changes can asynchronously occur.

## **Limitations**

The stories and voices shared in this research continue to echo the experiences of past and current students who identity as a woman of color, however, limitations in this research exist. The most significant limitation in this research was the impact of COVID-19 and how the lack of an on-campus experience altered everyone's sense of belonging. The virtual platform of learning and engaging with USD heightened student stress and changed how they interacted with campus programming. Participants may have been experiencing Zoom fatigue from their classes and other meetings so when they participate in additional screen time they may not be as engaged and their responses may be brief. Participants' mental and emotional well-being may

have also been challenged and thus further affecting how they responded to the journal prompts and interview questions. Additionally, some participants may be reluctant to share their full story due to a lack of private space. In an in-personal environment participants would have been able to sit in a private setting with me, however, being in their homes or current place of residency can affect how they answer based on who is within physical proximity of them. Moreover, as we all witnessed the #BlackLivesMatter movement and presidential elections, this may have been an added layer of stress for participants outside of academia. Especially as women of color, the historical events that occurred during this period may have significantly affected participant overall well-being and their sense of safety. These external events are beyond USD but have carried a heavy weight in student sense of belonging because of how USD responds to them. The impact of the collective trauma we have experienced due to the pandemic cannot be overlooked along with the #BlackLivesMatter movement and presidential election.

Another limitation is the number of participants and who was represented. Though there are similarities between stories shared, the experience of women of color are not a monolith. Originally, I anticipated for 5-8 participants but when I received more, I was surprised and excited to see how my research was also valued by the participants. I had diverse experiences and perspectives represented but I believe more voices can always be included to continue amplifying all voices of women of color and ensure inclusivity. Moreover, this research could have included non-traditional women of color students. Non-traditional in this context would be undergraduate students who are 25 years old and older and/or identify as a parent. There was one non-traditional student in this research, however there could have been more representation to better capture their experience at USD.

### **My Story: Final Reflections**

As I reflect on the entirety of my research, I realized how I had begun this process before I was even a graduate student. The stories other women of color shared with me that helped me to process my own identities and experiences have been an anchor for me as I navigate higher education as a student and professional. Their stories validated my own lived experiences and I want to continue building the same space for other women of color because I understand how pivotal it is to be able to share your own story. So, when I attended the program open house back in February 2019, I immediately knew I wanted my action research to center and empower the voices of women of color.

To better capture my experience as the researcher, I journaled my experience. At the end of each cycle I wrote a brief journal entry so I could later observe how my own thought process and own interpretations of each response and/or cycle may have changed or impacted me as a researcher. I also wanted to understand how previous cycles may have influenced the following cycle. However, amid the research process, I also began journaling when participant responses and interviews emotionally impacted me. I quickly realized how journaling helped me cope with the research process on a personal level. Some of the stories and experiences participants shared resonated with me and it ignited my continual passion in building more inclusive and holistically welcoming spaces for women of color. The story that stood out to me most was when a participant shared how they began going by a different name because their ethnic name was not being correctly pronounced by others. I remember closing this interview with heavy feelings because it triggered my own memories. During my own undergraduate experience, I shortened my own name because I did not want to inconvenience others. I would introduce myself with my full name but then quickly follow with my shortened name because I did not want others to feel

intimated by its uniqueness. I wanted to befriend and fit in with others, even within my own Hmong community. The parallels in our experiences made me realize how much women of color alter themselves to make others feel comfortable but at the cost of their own identity(ities).

During the research process I also noted how much time participants and I spent on casual conversation. I could have had a transactional relationship with each participant, however, I felt that this approach would be one-dimensional and not allow me to create a safer and braver space for them to share. Their willingness to stay beyond the scheduled time confirmed for me the continual need to create more spaces for women of color to openly share their experiences without judgement. These casual conversations did not collect data for this research but I believe they played a critical role in how participants shared with me in the research process.

The last reflection I had as I concluded my research was my own graduate experience as a woman of color at USD. I began answering the same questions I asked participants and saw similarities between our narratives. This realization saddened me because my student experience and sense of belonging did not necessarily get better in comparison to my undergraduate experience, I just learned how to better navigate higher education. Being a first-generation student there were nuances I did not know or understand so I would often lean on my peers who share a similar experience. Moreover, navigating the virtual environment as a graduate student and assistant was mentally and emotionally taxing. When some participants shared their frustrations with the institution, particularly during the racial uprisings, I could not help but have similar sentiments too. In the future, I hope there will be more research on graduate women of color and their sense of belonging at USD that can lead to more institutional support of the Graduate Commons and other graduate resources.

Professionally and personally I choose to be a creator of these spaces for women of color and other marginalized identities, so the burden does not fall back on them. I want to create an environment for marginalized students to thrive and not just survive. Education can be a safer and braver space for everyone to learn and grow but I know it can also be traumatic if there lacks a sense of belonging. Transforming our campus and culture around education to support our most marginalized identities will be challenging, but not impossible. This work is critical because when women of color are empowered to be their full authentic selves without judgement or pressure to conform, their future becomes limitless and they no longer need resiliency. Thus, we must continue listening to women of color because they are not voiceless, they have always been present and continue to carry the work that moves us towards our collective liberation.



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Appendix A  
Participant Out-Reach Email Template

Subject Title: [Research Opportunity] Women of Color & Sense of Belonging at USD

Hello [Insert Name],

My name is Mayzong Lee and I am a second year in the Higher Education Leadership program at USD. I am reaching out to see if you would be interested and willing to participate in my research. I am specifically reaching out to you because of previous conversations we have shared, your insight and experiences at USD are valuable and I want to amplify your voice.

At this moment my research is titled Undergraduate Women of Color and Sense of Belonging at USD. My research will explore how Women of Color (WOC) at USD experience their “sense of belonging” and what can USD do to continue supporting WOC. Using reflection, storytelling and dialogue to lead my research, my intended outcomes for this study are:

- To create a space for participants to share their stories
- Continue highlighting the experiences of WOC at USD
- Build a program framework for the Women’s Commons and other USD departments to reassess and update current programming/services to support WOC

If you decide to participate in my research, you would be committing to:

- Completing a reflection journal with prompts (30 Mins in December 2020)
  - The journal will be returned to me to be read
- Individual interview (1.5 hour in December 2020 or January 2021)
  - Will be audio and video recorded, will not be publicly released
- Participant group conversation (2 hours in February 2021)
  - Will be audio and video recorded, will not be publicly released

If you are interested or know of others who may be interested in participating in this research, please let me know. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to ask!

I look forward to your response!

Best,

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

- **Mayzong Lee**
  - Email: mayzonglee@sandiego.edu
- **Advisor: David Karp**
  - Email: dkarp@sandiego.edu
  - Phone: 619-260-4760

Appendix B  
Cycle 1 Journal Prompts

**Undergraduate Women of Color & Sense of Belonging at USD**  
**Mayzong Lee**

**Cycle One: Reflection Journaling**

- i. Participants will receive an online journal with prompts
- ii. Reflection questions:
  1. What identities are most salient to you?
  2. What is most empowering about being a Womxn of Color?
  3. How do you define sense of belonging at USD?
  4. How do you define an academic sense of belonging at USD?
  5. How do you define a social sense of belonging USD?
  6. How do you define a cultural sense of belonging at USD?
  7. Please write a letter to yourself:
    - a) Only you will read this letter, this letter will be read again at the end of our focus group meeting with other participants.

Appendix C  
Cycle 2 Interview Questions

**Undergraduate Women of Color & Sense of Belonging at USD**  
**Mayzong Lee**

**Cycle Two: Individual Interviews**

- i. Individual interview questions, meeting individually via private Zoom link:
  1. Why did you decide to attend USD?
  2. With your definition of sense of belonging at USD, can you describe a moment/experience when you felt this at USD?
  3. With your definition of an academic sense of belonging at USD, can you describe a moment/experience when you felt this at USD?
  4. With your definition of social sense of belonging at USD, can you describe a moment/experience when you felt this at USD?
  5. With your definition of cultural sense of belonging at USD, can you describe a moment/experience when you felt this at USD?
  6. Can you describe your overall sense of belonging at USD?
  7. What advice would you give to your first-year self?

Appendix D  
Cycle 3 Group Discussion Guideline

**Undergraduate Women of Color & Sense of Belonging at USD**  
**Mayzong Lee**

**Cycle Three: Focus Group Meeting**

i. Group meeting via private Zoom link with all participants

1. Individual introductions

- a) Name
- b) Pronouns (Optional)
- c) Year in school
- d) Major/Program

ii. Support and holding space

1. How would you like to be supported and held in this space?

iii. Conversation questions:

- a) Participants will use Jam Board (Google Suite Extension, all USD students have free access to this platform) throughout the group discussion to post and share their own experiences, stories, and thoughts. Participants will be able to view other responses and leave responses. Participants will be asked to leave their names with the posts they have created.

1. Jam Board #1: What words would you use to describe your sense of belonging at USD? (multiple posts can be made)

- a) Share-out: Are there other words on this board that resonate with you?

2. Can you describe a moment/experience when you felt belonging at USD?
3. Are there any emerging themes you noticed in the stories shared?

4. How do you help others feeling belonging at USD?
5. What advice would you give to first-year incoming Women of Color?
6. Jam Board #2: What words of affirmations would you like to share with other Women of Color at USD?
7. Sharing gratitude: what will you be taking away from this space?



Appendix E  
Group Discussion Jam Boards

friends

advisors

the commons

immersive

superficial

What words would you use to describe your sense of belonging at USD?

(You may make multiple posts.)

necessary

taxing

tokenism

orgs and clubs

community across campus

exhausting at times

We are proud of you.

you deserve to be here

You are beautiful. Eurocentric beauty standards got NOTHING on you.

You deserve and have earned a seat at the table

there is strength in vulnerability

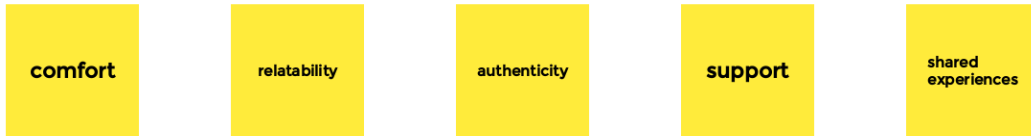
What words of affirmations would you share with other Women of Color at USD?

(You may make multiple posts.)

You are enough!!

Being your fullest self in taking up space at USD is revolutionary!

You are worthy of everything good in this world



What words would you use to describe your sense of belonging at USD?

(You may make multiple posts.)



What words would you use to describe your sense of belonging at USD?

(You may make multiple posts.)

Appendix F  
Consent Forms

**University of San Diego  
Institutional Review Board  
Research Participant Consent Form**

For the research study entitled:  
**Undergraduate Women of Color & Sense of Belonging at USD**

**I. Purpose of the research study**

Mayzong Lee is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he/she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to better understand the experience of undergraduate women of color at the University of San Diego.

**II. What you will be asked to do**

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

*\* Video recording will be used for data collection, will not be publicly released. Please see additional consent form*

- Submit a reflective journal with writing prompts (30 Mins)
- \*Participate in a private interview about your undergraduate experience as a woman of color. (1.5 Hours)
- \*Participate in a discussion group with other study participants about how sense of belonging is experienced at USD. (2 Hours)

Your participation in this study will take a total of 4 hours spread throughout 2 months.

**III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts**

**Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:**

- University of San Diego Counseling Center
  - Monday – Friday (8:20AM – 5:00PM); 24/7 Hotline: 619-260-5644
  - USD MyWellness Portal
- San Diego Mental Health Hotline
  - 1-800-479-333

**IV. Benefits**

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the experiences and sense of belonging of undergraduate women of color at the University of San Diego.

## **V. Confidentiality**

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may not be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may be used in future research.

## **VI. Compensation**

You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

## **VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research**

**Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this**, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

## **VIII. Contact Information**

**If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:**

1) Mayzong Lee

**Email:** [mayzonglee@sandiego.edu](mailto:mayzonglee@sandiego.edu)

2) David Karp

**Email:** [dkarp@sandiego.edu](mailto:dkarp@sandiego.edu)

**Phone:** 619-260-4760

## **Zoom Video Recording: Additional Consent**

A video recording will be made of you during your participation in this study. The video recordings will only be used for data collection purposes and transcript analysis. Records will not be shared and will be deleted upon completion of the project.

In addition to consenting to participate in the research study, you may choose to sign or NOT sign the statement below.

I hereby give permission to the Zoom video recording for this research study to be used only for data collection purposes. I understand that this Zoom video recording will not be publicly released or shared and will be deleted upon completion of the project.