

University of San Diego

Digital USD

M.A. in Higher Education Leadership: Action
Research Projects

School of Leadership and Education Sciences:
Student Scholarship & Creative Works

Summer 8-9-2022

Enhancing Graduate Student Onboarding to Strengthen Graduate Student Sense of Belonging and Ease the Transition into Graduate School

Shannon Patiño

University of San Diego, shannon.patino.mchs@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/soles-mahel-action>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Leadership Studies Commons](#)

Digital USD Citation

Patiño, Shannon, "Enhancing Graduate Student Onboarding to Strengthen Graduate Student Sense of Belonging and Ease the Transition into Graduate School" (2022). *M.A. in Higher Education Leadership: Action Research Projects*. 115.

<https://digital.sandiego.edu/soles-mahel-action/115>

This Action research project: Open access is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Leadership and Education Sciences: Student Scholarship & Creative Works at Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in M.A. in Higher Education Leadership: Action Research Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital USD. For more information, please contact digital@sandiego.edu.

**Enhancing Graduate Student Onboarding Programming to Strengthen Graduate Student
Sense of Belonging and Ease the Transition into Graduate School**

Shannon Patiño

Department of Leadership Studies, University of San Diego

August 10, 2022

Table of Contents

Abstract	5
Introduction	5
Literature Review	6
Facilitating Socialization Through Peer-to-Peer Support	8
Context	9
Methodology	11
Cycles and Results	14
Cycle 1: Sense of Belonging Survey	14
Cycle 2: Interviews	25
Cycle 3: Belonging Circle Design	30
Limitations	34
Recommendations	35
Offer Frequent Intentional Check-Ins and Refreshers	35
Incorporate Restorative Circles into the Onboarding Process	36
Require one Class to be Taken as a Whole Cohort	36
Provide Resources and Opportunities to Build a Foundation and Academic Confidence	37
Final Reflections	37
References	39
Appendix A	41
Appendix B	42
Appendix C	43

Appendix D	45
Appendix E	55
Appendix F	56
Appendix G	58

Abstract

The purpose of this action research was to study graduate students' sense of belonging enrolled in programs within the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES) at the University of San Diego (USD) and their transition experience. This study was guided by the question: How can I improve new student onboarding programming to increase graduate student sense of belonging during the early stages of our graduate students' onboarding experience? How can I also create a resource to help ease the graduate student transition into graduate school?

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected through a survey and one-on-one interviews with graduate students participating in the SOLES Student Ambassador program. The survey and interview data supported the importance of peer-to-peer support and connection and highlighted various opportunities for strengthening belonging and simultaneously easing the transition into graduate school for graduate students including, addressing imposter syndrome, facilitating connection, and increasing academic confidence.

The primary action component of this research was developing a restorative circle focused on belonging that administrators, faculty, academic advisers, admissions staff, and others involved in the graduate student onboarding process can use to strengthen belonging and ease the graduate student transition into graduate school.

Introduction

Building authentic relationships, wellness, and community are at the core of my values. I strongly believe that having authentic relationships is crucial to feeling supported and to feeling like you belong in a group or environment. Without authentic relationships to provide support and belonging, one can feel out of place or without purpose. This can lead to someone feeling overwhelmed or depressed and cause other mental health issues to surface as a result from not feeling belonging in an environment.

As a graduate student, I found it difficult to find belonging when I first started my graduate program. I felt nervous and not very prepared through my transition into graduate school after taking some time off to work. Additionally, it took time to develop relationships with peers as socialization is not a priority and it can be a little awkward getting to know someone new. My identities and personal and professional responsibilities also made it challenging to find belonging. Overall, transitioning into graduate school was an overwhelming process that left me wanting to do more to help graduate admissions while upholding my value of building community.

When I served as an admissions adviser for the University of San Diego's School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES), there were many opportunities to strengthen the sense of belonging among SOLES graduate students through the onboarding process. I played an active role in coordinating onboarding programming through the SOLES Office of Admissions and Outreach and believed that admissions staff could have an influence on incoming SOLES graduate students' sense of belonging even before the first day of classes. This led to my action research focus.

The intent of this study was to understand the sense of belonging among graduate

students in SOLES master's and doctoral programs and learn what factors play into graduate students' sense of belonging. I wanted to explore ways that I could promote a stronger sense of belonging using current admissions onboarding programs and how I could improve those processes to help ease graduate student's transition into grad school. I hoped to create more peer-to-peer interactions between newly admitted students and the student ambassadors to increase sense of belonging and increase enrollment deposits. I also hoped to improve belonging amongst the student ambassador group to improve engagement and mattering in the work they do to support prospective and newly admitted students.

This action research project was guided by the following research questions: How can I improve our onboarding programming to create a stronger sense of belonging during the early stages of our graduate students' onboarding experience? How can I also create a resource to help ease the graduate student transition into graduate school?

Literature Review

Sense of belonging is an area that has been consistently studied across undergraduate level students, but limited research has been done among the graduate student population (Pascale, 2018). Sense of belonging is an important concept to study as it can influence a student's academic integrity, self-esteem, persistence, and satisfaction in their programs (Sheeran & Cummings, 2018). There are many factors that impact a graduate students' sense of belonging including balancing graduate school with life demands, investment in a graduate degree, building friendships and establishing relationships with faculty (Pascale, 2018). Regardless of its level of impact on graduate student success and satisfaction, evidence indicates that the majority of efforts toward facilitating belonging is exclusively focused on the undergraduate level population. However, efforts in facilitating belonging among the graduate student population is

becoming crucial as studies show that jobs requiring at least a master's degree will increase by 18% by the year 2022 (Pascale, 2018). As more jobs require a graduate level degree, a stronger focus should be placed on improving the graduate student experience.

A student's sense of belonging is highly influenced during their time of transition and socialization into their programs and new environment. Like most research on graduate students, research on graduate student transition and socialization into graduate school is also limited. Additionally, not many researchers have examined how graduate students make sense of these experiences (Perez, 2016), or how these factors are important in building a strong sense of belonging and connectedness to their graduate programs. According to Karl Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory, making sense of an experience consists of assuming an identity, recalling and reviewing past experiences, linking previous sensemaking and current reality or 'interactions' (Magala, 1997). Sensemaking allows us to understand our emotions and processes when thrown into unexpected situations (Magala, 1997). Examining how graduate students make sense of their belonging in graduate school can help institutions better identify where there is a need for improving graduate students' sense of belonging.

Research available on the topic mainly focuses on the transition and socialization of graduate students into their practice versus into graduate school. However, these insights can still serve as guidance in examining sensemaking during a graduate student's transition and socialization into their graduate program. To facilitate efforts towards graduate students' sense of belonging and their transition into programs within SOLES, it was also important to review literature regarding graduate student onboarding programs and the importance of peer-to-peer support. Reviewing action research projects from previous MA in Higher Education Leadership Studies students (Kwak, 2019; Kitchings, 2019) also provided me with additional direction for

my research as they also inquired about improving the graduate student onboarding procedures at the University of San Diego or building peer-to-peer support. The research was helpful in identifying literature regarding the importance of graduate student onboarding programming and future readings on theories such as Chickering's theory of student development, and Schlossberg's theory of transitions.

Facilitating Socialization Through Peer-to-Peer Support

One of my main themes that stems from my values of wellness and building community is facilitating socialization through peer-to-peer support. Many changes and challenges arise during a graduate student's transition period into their graduate school program that can create psychological and emotional distress (Fakunmoku et al., 2016). In the first year of enrollment, graduate students have to navigate through "personal and professional schedule changes, pressure to obtain good grades, time constraints, financial problems, and challenging relationships with peers, faculty, and family" (Fakunmoju et al., 2016, p.49).

Graduate student onboarding programs become a crucial component to facilitating graduate students' socialization into their programs. Graduate student onboarding programs can strengthen a graduate student's sense of belonging by establishing trust and social support within their graduate programs and new environment. Onboarding programs, specifically programs that provide opportunities for interacting with like-minded peers, such as the SOLES Ambassador Program, have shown to increase engagement levels resulting in an increased sense of belonging and connectedness (Riley & White, 2016). Onboarding programs can also facilitate graduate student learning and socialization by connecting students to their learning environment and providing the tools and opportunities needed to help students navigate through their new social climate and personal and professional changes and challenges (Benevides & Keyes, 2016;

Fakunmoju et al., 2016).

To engage graduate students in onboarding programs, it is recommended to include socialization characteristics, such as faculty, alumni, and student org presentations, team building exercises, and faculty advising in onboarding programs to promote academic success and belonging in the program (Benevides & Keyes, 2016). Additionally, it is recommended to include activities that allow sharing, reflection, and self-evaluation of their lived experiences to promote openness and trust, therefore reducing fear of failure in meeting academic expectations and easing graduate students' transition into establishing their new identity as a graduate student (Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2018). The insights I gathered from these recommendations prompted me to reflect on my responsibilities as the SOLES ambassador program coordinator and admissions orientation lead. This reflection allowed me to identify some weak points of these programs where the above information and recommendations can assist in improving the outcomes and influence of the programs in promoting belonging among SOLES graduate students. One main focus will be to facilitate more peer-to-peer interactions to create more peer-to-peer support and strengthen a sense of belonging within SOLES graduate programs.

Context

This research study took place at the University of San Diego, a private institution which serves 5,919 undergraduate students and 2,450 graduate students including master's, doctoral, and paralegal. There are eight schools which host master's and doctoral programs, including SOLES. SOLES includes nine master's programs and two doctoral programs in the areas of teacher education, mental and behavioral sciences, and leadership studies. Programs are managed under separate departments: the Department of Counseling and the Marital and Family Therapy, the Department of Learning and Teaching, and the Department of Leadership Studies. Each

department has a program manager that works with the department faculty chair to manage the department, program mission, and goals. Each of these departments, along with the SOLES Office of Admissions and Outreach SOLES, and SOLES Dean's Office welcomes approximately 200 graduate students into their graduate programs every academic year.

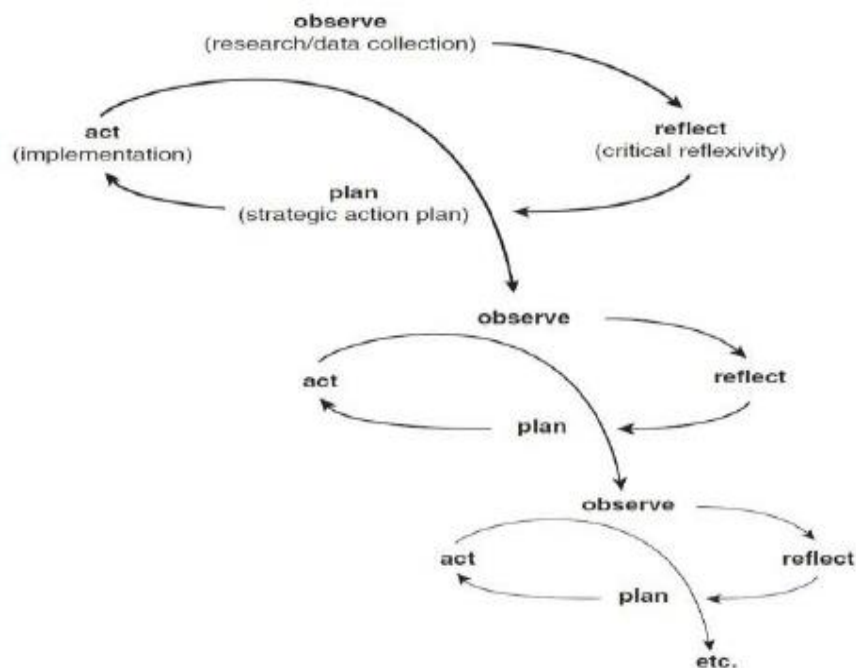
In efforts to promote SOLES programs and increase program interests and student enrollment, the Office of Admissions and Outreach has implemented programming such as on-campus open houses, webinars, class observations, and the SOLES Ambassador Program. The Office of Admissions and Outreach is also responsible for student onboarding programming including email outreach from student ambassadors and webinars that walk newly admitted students through next steps. Additionally, the office works with the SOLES Dean's Office and program managers to coordinate summer engagement events and the SOLES Orientation in the Fall. All incoming SOLES students are invited to the Fall Orientation. Onboarding programming is designed with the intention of providing support and informing incoming students about resources accessible to ease their transition into graduate school.

When I was serving as the admissions adviser, one of my main responsibilities was coordinating the SOLES Ambassador Program which plays a major role in the success of onboarding programming. The program typically consists of 60 SOLES graduate student volunteers from all SOLES programs, including Master's and Doctoral. During the onboarding of incoming SOLES graduate students, SOLES ambassadors volunteered to host newly admitted student webinars, take over the SOLES Instagram page and write for the SOLES blog to give students an inside peek into grad school, connected with newly admitted students by email, and assisted with orientation. The SOLES Ambassador program, along with all other onboarding programming, has the capacity to influence the sense of belonging of incoming SOLES graduate

students by providing support and opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions, faculty engagement, access to resources, and immersion into the SOLES community.

Methodology

In performing an action research project regarding belonging among graduate students, I chose to use a mixed methods approach for data collection and analysis. I included O’Leary’s (2004) cycles of research and incorporated the appreciative inquiry model design (Cooperrider & Servasta, 1987).



Action research is a participatory process which enacts change by addressing practical problems, engaging in reflection, and generating knowledge to achieve change-oriented goals (Mcniff 2016; O’Leary, 2004). Action research methods, such as O’Leary’s (2004) cycles of research and Cooperrider and Servasta’s (1987) appreciative inquiry model, rely on qualitative approaches through cycles of acting, reflecting, planning, and observing (Lewin, 1948). One of the challenging features in action research is its participatory process of working with other stakeholders to achieve sustainable change. In action research, “the exact nature of the steps in

each part of the cycle is emergent and developed collaboratively with stakeholders” (O’Leary, 2004, p.140) and can make it difficult to control the direction of the project. A mixed method approach helped to include both quantitative and qualitative data to enhance the credibility and relevance of the study’s outcomes and narratives through numeric data that can help stakeholders make data-driven decisions as well as ease the application of research into daily practice (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018).

Throughout my cycles of research, I used O’Leary’s cycles of research as the cyclical framework for cycles one and two and the appreciative inquiry (AI) model for cycle three. I chose to do this because AI “advocates for collective inquiry into the best of what is in order to imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling and thus, does not require the use of incentives, coercion or persuasion for planned change to occur” (Kessler, 2013, p.1). AI involves all organizational members and stakeholders to engage in inquiry.

Using a modification of O’Leary’s cycles of research, I combined the “plan” and “action” stages and began cycles one and two with a “plan and action”. I then moved to the “observe” stage and observed the data collected to inform and validate the purpose and meaning behind the research and intended outcomes. Lastly, I ended cycles one and two with the “reflect” stage and engaged in critical reflection of the data. Reflecting after observing was essential to building a better understanding of my research population as well as identifying themes found in research and data collection.

After completing two cycles using O’Leary’s research method, I integrated the AI model to complete cycle three by engaging in the AI stages of discovery, dream, design, and delivery (Kessler, 2013).

The goal of the first cycle was to create a picture of the graduate student body at SOLES and learn about their onboarding experience, and factors that influence sense of belonging. The goal of cycle two was to collect narratives regarding graduate student belonging and their experience transitioning into graduate school. Finally, the goal of the third cycle was to create a resource that could be used during the onboarding process to help ease the graduate student transition into graduate school.

Cycle one took place in Fall of 2020 and focused on understanding the sense of belonging amongst students that completed one academic year in a SOLES program. I initiated cycle one with a survey that was sent by email. The survey contained a demographic component to identify their graduate program, age, gender, sexual orientation, race and/or ethnicity, employment status, marital status, citizenship status, and military/veteran status. This was included to get a better picture of the student body at SOLES and many identities. The survey also inquired about their on-campus involvement, on-campus resources they have accessed, and onboarding programming they participated in before starting their program. Using a slider-type survey measure, I asked participants to rate the level of influence that peer-relationships, institutional resources, on-campus involvement, and faculty engagement has played a role in establishing a sense of belonging at USD, within SOLES, and in their programs. Lastly, I asked participants whether remote learning made it difficult to feel a part of the SOLES/USD community. After gathering survey responses, I observed the data and then engaged in reflection to include my interpretation of the data being analyzed.

Upon completing cycle one, I sent out a second email invitation for participation in one-on-one interviews to collect narratives regarding a graduate students' onboarding experience and their transition into grad school. During the interviews, I inquired about whether our onboarding

programming eased their transition into grad school, what challenges they had experienced during their transition and in finding belonging, what information or opportunities they wished they would have received, and the level of belonging they had established. Mirroring cycle one, I observed the data by assessing each narrative and then engaged in reflection.

Cycle three focused on designing a community circle that could be used by administrator, faculty, and staff to facilitate community and belonging during a graduate student's onboarding and transition process. Using an appreciative inquiry model, I moved through the cycles of discovery, dream, design, and deliver. In the discovery phase, I discussed my initial cycle three plans, why it did not go as planned, and how the data and reflections from cycles one and two helped me arrive at the idea of designing a community circle. In the Dream phase, I identified the objectives and themes that guided the circle design. Lastly, I provided a summary of my findings along with my circle design to stakeholders involved with new student onboarding including the SOLES Office of Admissions and Outreach, SOLES Deans Office, and SOLES academic program managers.

Cycle 1: Sense of Belonging Survey

Plan and Action

Cycle one initiated with an online survey that was centered around learning more about my participants, graduate students enrolled in a master's or doctoral program under the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES), how they defined sense of belonging, and the factors influencing the level of their sense of belonging. The survey was emailed to approximately 70 students participating in the SOLES Student Ambassador program. Out of the 70 ambassadors, 15 ambassadors completed the survey and two participants, that were identified based on their IP Address, completed the survey twice with slightly different responses. All

questions were optional therefore not all questions received responses. Each SOLES academic department was represented by survey participants but not all programs were represented by survey participants. The survey did not receive interaction or responses from student ambassadors in the MA in Nonprofit Leadership program which also had the lowest number of student ambassador participants.

Table 1. Participation by Academic Department and Program

<u>Participation by Academic Department</u>	
Department of Counseling and Marital and Family Therapy	6
Department of Leadership Studies	5
Department of Learning and Teaching	5
<u>Participation by Program</u>	
MA in Counseling, Clinical Mental Health Counseling	1
MA in Marital and Family Therapy	1
MA in Counseling, School Counseling	3
MA in Higher Education Leadership	1
MA in Leadership Studies	1
MA in Nonprofit Leadership and Management	0
MEd in Curriculum and Instruction	4
PhD in Education for Social Justice	3
PhD in Leadership Studies	

Observe

Belonging is a word that has many meanings. It was important to understand how

participants defined belonging and how these definitions contribute to a strong sense of belonging. I began the survey by asking participants to define belonging in three words. The WordCloud in Figure 1.0 displays the words participants used to define belonging. Words with the most frequency are shown in large font sizes while words with the least frequency are shown in smaller font sized. Among the 21 different words participants used to define belonging, community, connection, acceptance, support, comfort, authenticity, and their variants (other forms, spellings, or tenses of the same word or meaning) were used the most. Some of the uniquely used words or phrases to define belonging that maintain some connection to the most used words included, ability to exhale, shared experience, safety, trust, and healing.

Figure 1. WordCloud Defining Belonging



The following section of the survey was aimed towards understanding a participant's sense of belonging within SOLES and how that compares to their sense of belonging within their cohort. On a 1-10 Likert scale, participants rated their sense of belonging within their cohorts and within SOLES. Overall, participants felt a stronger sense of belonging within their cohorts than within SOLES. The sum of all the ratings for "sense of belonging within their cohorts" equaled 110 points while the sum of all the ratings for "sense of belonging within SOLES" equaled 89 points. The average of the individual ratings for "sense of belonging within cohort"

was 7.33 while the average for “sense of belonging within SOLES” was 5.93.

After the participants rated their level of sense of belonging within SOLES and their Cohort, I also asked participants to rate the impact that peer-to-peer support, faculty engagement, involvement, and resources and institutional support had on their sense of belonging. Peer-to-peer support included student engagement activities that encouraged community building, mentorship, and support amongst peers such as the mentor collective program, socials within their cohort, and interaction with student ambassadors. Faculty engagement accounted for opportunities that allow students to establish relationships and support with faculty including office hours and social events such as the lunch with the Dean. Involvement opportunities included participation in student organizations and attending graduate student life events. Lastly, resources and institutional support included the Writing Center, Copley Library, and Career Services. Overall, participants rated peer-to-peer support as having a high level of impact to their sense of belonging. Faculty engagement was the second highest and involvement opportunities was third highest and resources and institutional support was rated as having the lowest level of impact.

To understand the impact of onboarding programming and practices, I had participants reflect on the resources and support provided during their onboarding experience, beginning from when they were accepted into the program, and those provided within SOLES, their program’s department, and their cohort. I first asked participants to select the onboarding programs they participated in during their onboarding process. The onboarding programs listed as options included the Newly Admitted SOLES Facebook group, student ambassador outreach, newly admitted student webinars, incoming student social hours, graduate student org open house, program orientation and orientation videos. All programs received some participation, but

there was high participation in the program orientation, student ambassador outreach and newly admitted student webinars, and low participation in the incoming student social hours, the graduate student org open house, and orientation videos.

As a follow up, I asked participants to rate the influence each onboarding program had on the student's sense of belonging, program orientation received a 100% response rate and was rated highest in terms of influence. Student ambassador outreach received a 70% response rate and had the second highest rating. While newly admitted student webinars received a lower response rate compared to orientation videos and the graduate student org open house, it ranked higher in level of influence

To better understand the ease of building peer relationships and how students felt about their transition into grad school, I asked participants to rate their ease of building peer relationships and their transition into grad school and most participants stated that it was somewhat easy to build peer relationships and transition into grad school. I also asked participants to describe their agreement level on whether orientation provided resources for navigating the transition into grad school, allowed for building relationships with peers, and building relationships with faculty. Participants could select responses from strongly agree, somewhat agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree. On average, participants agreed or somewhat agreed that orientation provided resources for navigating the transition into grad school. The statement of whether orientation allowed for building relationships with peers received had varied responses ranging from strongly agree to disagree with only one participant saying they disagreed with the statement. Most participants somewhat agreed that orientation allowed for building relationships with faculty. Only one participant said they somewhat disagreed.

I was also interested in knowing whether being remote because of the Covid-19 pandemic impacted sense of belonging. Out of the 15 research participants, 10 started a program in 2019 and spent at least their first semester in-person before the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The other four participants that stated their enrollment term began a program in 2020, started their program remotely with an online onboarding experience. The question I asked participants was whether remote learning made it difficult to feel a part of the SOLES/USD community. More than half of the participants answered yes and only a few answered somewhat or no. The participant that answered yes explained that “remote learning is just that – remote. It creates a sense of isolation and prohibits interaction and relationship building with my cohort, the faculty, the staff and USD community members.” Another participant that answered somewhat explained, “I miss running into classmates and fellow students in the hall before and after classes. It’s harder to build connections, especially with those with whom I don’t have classes and/or are in different stages of the program than I am.” Explanations from participants who responded no was because they were already enrolled in an online program or because they started their program on campus and stated,

“I feel like I was able to establish relationships with the cohort and faculty before we went remote learning. I intentionally contributed to student orgs even after we started remote learning to keep myself busy and to feel connected with SOLES community”

Another participant explained that remote learning still allowed them to do the work of being a part of the SOLES/USD community through zoom events.

Finally, to paint a picture of the graduate student body at soles, I had participants respond to various demographic questions in the final section of the survey. The following table outlines

the demographic make-up of the participants that completed the survey.

<u>Entry Term</u>	<u># of Participants</u>	<u>% of Participants</u>
Fall 2019	9	60
Fall 2020	4	27
Summer 2019	1	6.7
Unknown	1	6.7
<u>Age</u>	<u># of Participants</u>	<u>% of Participants</u>
21-25 years	3	20
25-30 years	3	20
30-39 years	5	33
40-49 years	2	13.3
50-59 years	0	0
60 and older	2	13.3
<u>Sex</u>	<u># of Participants</u>	<u>% of Participants</u>
Male	2	13.3
Female	13	87
<u>Race</u>	<u># of Participants</u>	<u>% of Participants</u>
African	1	6.7
Asian	3	20
Black and/or African American	1	6.7
Hispanic/Hispanic and White	5	33
Middle Eastern	1	6.7
White	4	27

<u>Belonging to</u>	<u># of Participants</u>	<u>% of Participants</u>
LGBTQIA+ community	1	6.7
DACA or Undocumented group	1	6.7
<u>Employment Status</u>	<u># of Participants</u>	<u>% of Participants</u>
Full-time	6	40
Part-time	4	27
Full-time student	3	20
Internship or assistantship	1	6.7
Unknown	1	6.7
<u>Marital Status</u>	<u># of Participants</u>	<u>% of Participants</u>
Married	5	33
Separated	1	6.7
Single	9	60
<u>Have children</u>		
Yes	5	33
No	10	67

Reflect

Many of the words participants used to define belonging are related or work synonymously when thinking about a sense of belonging. I would argue that all are needed to create a strong sense of belonging. When I think of community, I think of a place or group where I feel connected through shared identities and or experiences. In restorative justice philosophy, a community is one that provides safety, trust, support, and healing. A sense of belonging is highly

influenced by community. Through this activity it became apparent to me that belonging is determined by community, a community that allows individuals to feel safe, to be authentic, to breathe, and be vulnerable, because there is trust, comfort, care, and support. This would make sense why students feel a stronger sense of belonging in their cohorts than in SOLES as a whole.

For one, students will experience the most socialization within their cohorts therefore facilitating peer-to-peer relationships. In cohorts, students are following a similar curriculum and most students will have common goals and career interests which lead to more connections and shared experiences. It also makes it easier to find others with shared identities whether it be race, ethnicity, culture, being first generation, being a parent, etc. While connections and shared experiences can be found outside the cohort and within SOLES, it is not always feasible. For instance, not all programs follow the same schedule. Some programs only have evening courses while others have daytime and afternoon offerings, and some programs require fieldwork experiences of 500+ hours in addition to classes limiting the time students have for socializing with peers outside of their cohort. To increase the level of belonging outside of cohorts, there would need to be collaboration across academic departments and programs encouraging socialization with peers in other programs which currently hardly exists.

Along with peer-to-peer support, my survey showed that faculty engagement and involvement opportunities also had a high level of impact. All three factors, facilitate socialization by establishing trust and social support. Peer-to-peer support programs and involvement opportunities allows students to make connections with like-minded individuals that are going through a similar experience. Faculty engagement is a factor that Benevides and Keyes (2016) says promotes academic success and belonging in the program. Through my years as an admissions adviser, this has been an area that is often overlooked in the graduate student

onboarding experience and should be focused on earlier in a student's journey so faculty-student relationships can have time to develop. As for the participants that did not provide responses for involvement opportunities and resources and institutional support, I wonder if perhaps they had not been involved or had the opportunity to seek resources and institutional support.

Ensuring that graduate students have the resources for navigating the transition into grad school is one of the things that we in the admissions office focus on when designing onboarding programs, including orientation. Participants that began a program in 2019 had an in-person orientation and could attend information sessions about resources in-person. Participants that began a program in 2020 had a virtual orientation and received information about resources in the form of recorded videos. Based on the responses, both the in-person and virtual orientations were adequate at providing resources for navigating the transition into grad school. However, most responses were somewhat agreed versus strongly agree meaning there is room for improvement.

Something that surprised me from the survey were the responses to the ease of building peer relationships. When I initially created the survey, I thought that there would be more "somewhat challenging" or "challenging" responses to the ease of building peer relationships. I was surprised by how many participants said it was somewhat easy or easy to build peer relationships. Perhaps I should have included a why and have participants explain their responses and gain more insight as to what things are being done well and what needs improvement in facilitating peer relationships. I could have also asked about how quickly they established peer relationships.

The responses regarding the transition into grad school were more aligned with what I had predicted prior to conducting the survey. More participants rated the transition into grad

school as either a neutral process, somewhat challenging, or challenging. While slightly less than half of the participants said the transition was somewhat easy, no participants said that it was easy. Participants that were enrolled in programs that follow a true or relatively true cohort, meaning they move through a program together, for instance taking classes in the same order, were more likely to respond saying the transition was neutral or somewhat easy. On the other hand, participants that were enrolled in programs that do not follow a true cohort model, programs that do not require students to take all the same courses or in the same order, expressed a somewhat challenging or challenging transition into grad school.

In terms of Covid-19 and how that affected a student's transition into grad school, it seemed that participants that were enrolled in a fully online program or that began their program in-person and had an in-person orientation, the transition was easier than for students that started their in-person programs remotely. In March of 2020, everyone was sent home to live, work, and attend classes remotely due to the Covid-19 virus. This brought on several challenges including learning how to interact and engage with peers, faculty, and the USD/SOLES community remotely. Based on the responses, being remote did allow for more accessibility of events, students were able to continue building community virtually. However, students still missed the in-person informal interactions such as passing other classmates in the hallway and things like "water cooler" chats.

Finally, the demographic data I collected demonstrated the complexity and diversity of the graduate student body and the graduate students enrolled in programs at SOLES. Graduate students range much greater in ages in comparison to undergraduate students, they also are more likely to work full-time or have families of their own. Graduate students juggle many identities, priorities and life experiences that differ from those during undergraduate years. Even with

having completed a college degree program previously, enrolling in a graduate program can feel like a new process as graduate students have to relearn how to be a student and learn how to be a student while also navigating the new identities, priorities, and life experiences they acquired post undergraduate studies. These are all things that I think are important to consider when supporting graduate students and creating resource to facilitate their transition and socialization into their graduate environment.

Cycle 2: Interviews

Plan and Action

For cycle two, I conducted one-on-one interviews with eight SOLES student ambassadors who expressed interest in participating in an interview. The participant breakdown included three participants in counseling or marital and family therapy programs, two participants in the PhD in Leadership Studies, two in the PhD in Education for Social Justice, and one in the MEd in Curriculum and Instruction program. The interviews were conducted over Zoom and participants were asked questions from a list of seven questions that focused on understanding the students' sense of belonging and experience transitioning into graduate school. The interview style was semi-structured and lasted for approximately 30-minutes. I wanted the conversation to flow in a natural and authentic manner so not all questions were asked due to either a provided response that answered multiple questions in one or different follow-up questions emerged based on the participant's response.

Observe

Theme 1: Connection

It quickly became apparent that knowing or being connected with other students that share common experiences, race, culture, or ethnicity had an influential impact on their

confidence establishing a sense of belonging and transitioning into grad school. As a person of color, Participant 7 explained that one of the first things they do, and other people of color do is look for people on campus who look like them. They also expressed not being able to completely be themselves because:

“you’re not like around or feel comfortable enough around people who may not understand where you’re coming from and because there weren’t as many people at USD who look like me, I wasn’t sure if I felt completely comfortable sort of letting my guard down all the way”.

Like Participant 7, Participant 3 is a student of color who revealed that they felt a stronger sense of belong with their academic department because they were more diverse than their peers. They felt that they could not connect with many peers and mainly connected with groups that they could relate to in terms of race, ethnicity, and culture.

Participant 1 had taken off some time after their undergraduate studies before returning to school and discussed that it would have been helpful to know that they were not the only one who had returned to school after taking time off. Participant 1 stated:

“I think that would have been really helpful to like, see or have like people talk about their experience about coming back to school and just kind of normalize that [...] to have a kind of workshop to be like, ‘hey, you’re not the only one’”.

As a first-generation student and person of color, Participant 3 echoed similar feelings and explained that they felt that not many of their peers shared similar hardships and barriers to education. Participant 3 also discussed the impacts of imposter syndrome which happened to be another theme that presented itself during the interviews with Participant 6 and Participant 8.

Theme 2: Imposter Syndrome

Wiegand, R., Barton, A., Zakszeski B., and Mackey, I., explains that “imposter syndrome has been described as the persistent perception of ‘intellectual phoniness’, in which an individual attributes their successes to external factors or circumstances rather than their competence or knowledge” (35). Graduate students, regardless of experience or knowledge, experience imposter syndrome and has a large impact on a student’s perception of their performance and how one shows up.

In relation to imposter syndrome, participant 3 voiced that their transition was challenging:

“I was a graduate student and a first gen, so that was hard for me. Never thinking, you know, that imposter syndrome, radical acceptance of like, wow, I’m here. I never thought I was even going to go to college and the transition was I feel like it was hard. I think it’s still hard. It’s my last semester, and I’m still in disbelief that I’m here.

While already having completed a master’s program, participant 8 still experienced imposter syndrome as they entered a doctoral program:

“After starting the program, I started to feel less confident about my ability to interact with diverse people from a place of confidence [...] it was the first time I’d ever experienced imposter syndrome in an academic environment and it had nothing to do with the curriculum, it was just because of my identity”.

Participant 6 also experienced imposter syndrome when starting their program. However, a class they took during their first semester helped with their transition and battling imposter syndrome. The course taught the students the language of the work they would be performing, how to read academic articles and journals, and provided them with the foundations they needed to help them gain academic confidence. Participant 6 expressed gratitude towards the professor

and said that they recognized that everything was new, and no one felt like they belonged yet.

Theme 3: Providing a Foundation, Facilitated Community Building and Learning

A few participants voiced that they wished there was a class or workshop like the one Participant 6 took that provided them with a foundation that helps students gain academic confidence or that allows them to build connections with peers. Participant 8 explained that having “an optional course, that is offered before the program starts, that has some preparatory readings, background information, and historical context” would have been helpful in their transition because “there is not always enough time to cover all the material once the semester begins”. Participant 4 supported the benefits of taking a class prior to their programming started and said that their transition “was a bit of a bumpy ride back but not too bad. I think it helped that I ended up taking one summer class and so I had one class to dip my toes in the water”. They discussed how through the class, not only did it give them a taste of what their time in the program would be like, but they also were able to connect with students that were further along the program who provided them with guidance and mentorship.

Participants conveyed wanting more program or campus organized opportunities to interact with peers, staff, and faculty to feel more connected to their cohort and SOLES and build community. For instance, participant 6 and 8 indicated that a barrier that influenced their sense of belonging was that some of their classmates had full time jobs and some were not so it made organizing student hosted events difficult and stated that students would be more likely to attend department facilitated gatherings. Whereas Participant 1 experienced an easier time building community because they were in a class with their entire cohort during their first semester and said, “it really helped us build connections because we did a lot of like big group work and big group share outs where we got to know each other and hear about our backgrounds and ask each

other questions”.

Along the lines of department facilitated gatherings, participants 5 and 8 revealed that a challenge or barrier to establishing a strong sense of belonging was that not everyone knows how to navigate conflict that may disrupt community and that more facilitation in navigating conflict and learning would be helpful to “have authentic conversations that promote critical consciousness, learning, and growth” especially since many of the programs are rooted in social justice. Participant 3 also wished there were more facilitated conversation such as *Platicas* to “discuss issues that are happening”.

Theme 4: Onboarding Programming

Overall, participants had positive experiences with SOLES onboarding programs. Participant 7 mentioned that the student ambassador that connected with them a couple weeks after being admitted was integral to helping them have a smoother transition. Orientation also contributed to their sense of belonging as it helped them make friends, begin establishing relationships with professors, and learn about the resources available on-campus. Participant 5’s program hosted a dinner for newly admitted students that helped them gain a sense of belonging early on because they were able to meet others that were admitted. Participant 3 also said that the ambassador program helped during their transition because it is a diverse community.

While SOLES onboarding programs received positive feedback, participants also communicated that the onboarding experience could be improved by providing mid semester or quarterly check-in to gauge student’s sense of belonging, how their transition is going, and what support and resources students still need. Participant 6 also stated,

“At the beginning, I didn’t know what I didn’t know and so I would start asking questions but I wasn’t even sure what questions to ask and so I think something along the

lines of like a workshop that discusses the questions you should be asking or things that help you prepare such as books”.

Lastly, throughout my interview with participant 7, spoke about how the financial component was a barrier to their sense of belonging and while there were sessions about financial aid during their onboarding, they still felt that they were on their own and said that “it would be good to have workshops on how loans work, how to start paying them when you’re in school, if possible, and what to expect”.

Cycle 3: Belonging Circle Design

Discovery

It had been over a year since my first two cycles were completed. In that time, I ended up transitioning out of higher education work and struggled with determining what an action for this project would be. Originally, I had planned to use Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to engage in collective inquiry with the SOLES Office of Admissions and Outreach and SOLES Dean’s Office, and academic program managers to engage in the AI stages of discovery, dream, design, and delivery. Unfortunately, I no longer had the connection I once did with SOLES, so I had to make revisions for my third cycle and come up with a new way to complete the cycle using AI.

During the interviews, a participant suggested using restorative practices to “facilitate challenging conversations authentically such as community circles, restorative conferences and minimize responses to challenging conversations in ways that are aggressive or diminishing as a human”. This led to the initiation of designing a community circle that could be used during a grad student’s onboarding process or at any early stage of their transition into grad school. While enrolled as a graduate student at SOLES, I enrolled in courses offered under the SOLES Restorative Justice Facilitation Certificate program where I first learned about restorative circles

and how they can be used for things such as community building and identity exploration. In the courses I completed, I gained the resources and knowledge for designing circles.

Dream

My goal for creating a circle was to help students establish connections to strengthen their sense of belonging, but to also build their confidence and hopefully ease their transition into grad school. My dream circle process, is one where everyone feels able to speak and be heard because there is trust and nurturing, learn more about themselves, each other, and being in community, and experience growth. Lastly, it is my hope that it will provide students with imposter syndrome a moment to recognize it, process it, learn that they are not alone in experiencing imposter syndrome, and show compassion for themselves.

Design

Restorative circles are a “carefully constructed, intentional dialogue space” that allow everyone the opportunity to share, be heard, and be supported (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, p.60). This means that dedicated and thoughtful preparation is needed to tailor a circle to the needs of the group. Circles focus on balancing developing action plans, getting acquainted, addressing issues, and building relationships. In a circle, participants sit in a circle and there is a keeper of the circle who acts as the main facilitator helping all participants move through the circle process, makes sure the circle is upholding the values and guidelines established, guides the circle through reflection, and ensuring that quality of the circle is one of respect and safety.

One unique component of the circle space is that there is a values component. During the values component, participants work together to “identify values that they feel are important for a healthy process and good outcomes for all” (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, p.60). By identifying values together, it allows participants to express their “best”, or “core self”, and

therefore see the “core self” of others (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, p.60). It also sets the expectations and guidelines of the circle space and all who participate. Values were intentionally incorporated throughout my circle design through various activities in hopes that it would help individuals 1) become aware and mindful of what is important for them to feel at their best self and centered and 2) become aware and mindful of what is important for others to feel at their best self.

The second unique component is that there is a centerpiece that “supports speaking from the heart and listening from the heart” and “should convey a sense of warmth, hospitality, and inclusion” while supporting the values of the circle and its participants (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, p.62). The centerpiece is started by the facilitator, but then throughout the circle process, participants will build onto the centerpiece with items that represent the group and each participant. Facilitators can also ask participants, prior to joining the circle, to bring an item that they feel represents who they are. For my circle design, participants will perform various activities that involve writing down values and words of encouragement and drawing a tree of life to engage in story telling. At the end of the activities, participants would be able to add their writings and drawing to the centerpiece.

The third unique component of the circle is the use of a talking piece that is passed from person to person, allowing each participant an “equal” opportunity to speak or pass when they are the holder of the talking piece (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, p.62). The talking piece can be a physical, or if hosting a virtual circle, an imaginary object, a gesture, etc. The talking piece provides participants autonomy over their circle process experience and authorizing each to speak or pass.

The fourth unique component of the circle are “rounds”. There is typically an

introduction/check-in, storytelling, and check-out round. Rounds are initiated by prompting questions asked by the keeper. After a prompting question is provided, the talking piece is passed around the circle until everyone has had an opportunity to speak or pass. The keeper goes first during storytelling round and last during the circle topic round. During rounds, the keeper will also “direct participants to engage in an activity that helps them connect with their thoughts and feelings on the topic” (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, p.73). The Tree of Life activity in my circle design will act as the storytelling round and the imposter syndrome and belonging rounds will act as the circle topic rounds. The check-out round will include a prompting question that directs the participants to reflect on everything that was shared and said and share one thing that stuck with them.

The circle outline for my design includes,

1. Welcome
2. Mindfulness moment
3. Opening ceremony
4. Explanation of the circle process and unique components including the generation of values, centerpiece and talking piece.
5. Statement of purpose
6. Introduction of “rounds” and check-in round
7. Generation of values and development of guidelines
8. Storytelling round – Tree of life activity
9. Circle topic round – Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale Test
10. Circle topic round – Belonging
11. Check-out round

12. Closing

Even though I have provided various prompts and activities in my circle design, it is by no means a fixed outline and it is my hope that whoever uses my circle design will take the time to think about who will be participating, what activities and prompting questions would add value, etc.

Delivery

My circle design is under Appendix G, and it was delivered to the SOLES academic program managers, department chairs, faculty that are also academic advisers, administrators involved with graduate student engagement, and the new admissions and outreach adviser/ambassador coordinator along with my research findings and recommendations.

Limitations

One that I faced while conducting my research was Zoom burnout. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I was working, attending classes, and practically living remotely. While I had intended on completed cycles one and two virtually, I do not feel that I was able to be fully present and consistent while conducting the one-on-one interviews in cycle two. I found myself conducting each interview slightly different or not asking all the same questions to each participant.

Another limitation was not having representation for all programs. For some programs I had several participants and for some I only had one or none, so it was difficult to be confident with my interpretations and reflections of the data because I could only support it based on the one participant that responded and my own experiences and knowledge from working as the admissions adviser for SOLES.

Lastly, my biggest limitation was having moved out-of-state which caused me to feel

disconnected from my research and identity as a graduate student and USD employee. Therefore, I did not look at my survey or interview data in a year. Eventually, I also transitioned out of higher education work and started a position in public utility administration, so I no longer had the same passion or connection to this work as I once did. Leaving my position as the admissions adviser for SOLES made it challenging to conduct my originally planned cycle three which was to meet with individuals involved with graduate student onboarding and use the data I collected to improve the graduate student onboarding experience.

Recommendations

A goal of my research is to improve graduate student onboarding to strengthen sense of belonging and ease the transition into graduate school. A major finding that became apparent through my research is graduate students wanting to meet and connect with peers that have shared experiences and identities to not feel alone in their transition but supported. Graduate students also want more resources and opportunities for building a foundation and academic confidence prior to the start of their program to minimize imposter syndrome and ease their transition. My recommendations include: offer frequent intentional check-ins and refreshers, incorporate restorative circles into the onboarding process, require one class to be taken as a whole cohort during the first semester, and provide resources and opportunities to build a foundation and academic confidence.

Offer Frequent Intentional Check-Ins and Refreshers

Especially during the first semester, academic advisers and student engagement directors should establish intentional check-ins and refreshers at least once a month. Academic advisers should do their best to offer times that would be feasible for first year students to attend. Students do not know what they do not know. Therefore, check-ins should be offered in a group setting

versus only offering office hours and should be prepped to with guiding questions to get conversations flowing such as, *what are some challenges and successes you are experiencing?*

Graduate students get busy during the semester and may not easily find the time to seek out resources. It may be helpful to provide refreshers on resources available to graduate students on-campus and invite offices that offer graduate student resources to host workshops or short sessions to introduce their point of contacts. For example, if it is common for graduate students to experience imposter syndrome when starting their program, see if the wellness center offers workshops on imposter syndrome, or maybe through the check-ins you find that students appear burnt out and struggling to balance their workload then see if the writing center or center for academic success has a workshop to help students find balance in, for example, completing readings and writing more efficiently.

Incorporate Restorative Circles into the Onboarding Process

Alternatively, or along with, frequent check-ins and refreshers, I recommend the incorporation of restorative circles into the onboarding process to facilitate graduate student belonging and identify concerns or challenges graduate students may be facing as they transition into graduate school. Circles could be hosted before the beginning of a semester to focus on community and connection building and during the start of semester to address the concerns or challenges that may arise such as imposter syndrome, burnout, navigating conflict, responding to community trauma, etc. I recommend that faculty and administrators get the book “Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community” by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis to learn more about the circle process, how to design a circle, and the various topics circles can be used to facilitate and have access to sample openings and closings materials including ceremonies, prompts, meditations, group-building exercises, and readings. I also recommend

collaborating with the Center for Restorative Justice or individuals that may be experience in facilitating circles to help facilitate the circle process, such as the students enrolled in the Certificate in Restorative Justice Facilitation and Leadership who may be in their practicum and need to facilitate several circles to meet their practicum requirements.

Require one Class to be Taken as a Whole Cohort

My research highlighted a correlation between programs with a true cohort model creating an easier transition and facilitation of peer-to-peer relationships for graduate students. My recommendation is to require all students in a cohort to enroll in at least one class or seminar together during the first semester, so cohorts get the opportunity to meet all the other students in their cohort and hopefully establish a stronger support group and network.

Provide Resources and Opportunities to Build a Foundation and Academic Confidence

My final recommendation would be to provide resources and opportunities to help graduate students build a foundation for being successful in the program and feel more confident about their academic capabilities. For instance, before the semester begins, programs could offer incoming graduate students with a list of books, articles, etc. that they can or should read before the start of the program to be more familiar with the language and terminologies commonly used in the program. Departments could also offer a sample course that would give incoming graduate students a taste of what classes would be like and include some sample assignments. This would greatly ease the transition for incoming students and perhaps reduce anxious feelings from the unknown.

Final Reflections

Overall, this research validated the importance of the work I was doing as an admissions

adviser and coordinator for the ambassador program and the impact it has on building community and helping incoming students build connection and navigate their new journey. My research also reminded me that I am not alone. There are others that experienced similar challenges in transitioning to grad school and finding belonging.

I believe that my research supports the need for more research on graduate student belonging as there is a link between belonging, ease of transition into grad school, and academic success. In my experience, there was not much offered before starting the program to facilitate belonging, a program foundation, or academic confidence. While orientation offers some of this, it is condensed into one day, so it does not give incoming graduate students enough time to establish strong connections with their peers, academic advisors, or faculty.

It is my hope that my research will support administrators and faculty in improving onboarding processes to improve a graduate student's onboarding experience to strengthen sense of belonging and ease the transition into grad school.

References

- Benavides, A. D., & Keyes, L. (2016). New-student orientations: Supporting success and socialization in graduate programs. *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, 22(1), 107-124.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2016.12002231>
- Boyes-Watson, C. & Pranis, K. (2015). Circle Forward: Building A Restorative School Community. *Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis*.
- Clance, P. R. (n.d.). *Impostor Phenomenon (IP)*. Pauline Rose Clance, PH.D., ABPP.
Retrieved August 5, 2022, from
https://www.paulineroseclance.com/impostor_phenomenon.html
- Fakunmoju, S., Donahue, G. R., McCoy, S., & Mengel, A. S. (2016). Life satisfaction and perceived meaningfulness of learning experience among first-year traditional graduate social work students. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(6), 49- 62.
<https://doi.org/10.7176/JEP>
- Kessler, E. H. (2013) *Encyclopedia of Management Theory*. Sage Publications. 1-5.
<https://beedie.sfu.ca/sms/admin/DocLibrary/ic/33eb87a3379d71252e30f48e96c9bc6.pdf>
- Kitchings, C. (2019). *Peer-to-peer interactions between first-generation students at the University of San Diego* [Master's thesis, University of San Diego]. Digital USD.
<https://digital.sandiego.edu/soles-mahel-action/45/>
- Kwak, Y. (2019). *A collaborative approach toward onboarding for graduate and law students*. [Master's thesis, University of San Diego]. Digital USD.
<https://digital.sandiego.edu/soles-mahel-action/27/>
- Magala, S. J. (1997). Book review essay: Karl E. Weick: Sensemaking in organizations:1995,

- London. *Organizations Studies*, 18(2), 317-322.
- <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/017084069701800206>
- Matheson, R., & Sutcliffe, M. (2018). Belonging and transition: An exploration of international business students' postgraduate experience. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 55(5), 576-584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2017.1279558>
- McNiff, J. (2016). You and your action research project (4th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- O'Leary, Z. (2004). The essential guide to doing research. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Pascale, A. B. (2018). Co-existing lives: Understanding and facilitating graduate studentsense of belonging. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 55(4), 399-411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2018.1474758>
- Perez, R. J. (2016). Exploring developmental differences in students' sensemaking duringthe transition to graduate school. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(7), 763- 777. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0077>
- Riley, T., & White, V. (2016). Developing a sense of belonging through engagement with like-minded peers: A matter of equity. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 51, 211-225. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-016-0065-9>
- Sheeran, N., & Cummings, D. (2018). An examination of the relationship between Facebook groups attached to Facebook groups attached to university courses and student engagement. *The International Journal of Higher Education Research*, 76, 937-955. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0253-2>
- Weller, N. B. (n.d.). *The Tree of Life: A Simple Exercise for Reclaiming Your Identity and*

Direction in Life Through Story. Nathan B. Weller. Retrieved August 5, 2022, from <https://nathanbweller.com/tree-life-simple-exercise-reclaiming-identity-direction-life-story/>

Wiegand, R., Barton, A., Zakszeski, B., & Mackey, I. (2021). Impostor Syndrome: What It Is and How to Overcome It as a Graduate Student. *Communique (0164775X)*, 49(8), 35. <https://sandiego.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=150426248&site=ehost-live>

Appendix A: Research Project Participation Recruitment Email

Hi Ambassadors,

As you may know, I am working towards my Masters in Higher Education Leadership and am required to complete an action research project. For my Action Research project, titled *Graduate Student Sense of Belonging and the Onboarding Process*, I am conducting a study to understand the factors that contribute to a sense of belonging amongst SOLES graduate students. This study aims to identify the areas of improvement in SOLES onboarding practices and contribute to the research and narratives regarding the graduate student experience.

My research will involve collecting data and narratives through a survey and phone interview. I will then present the findings to key individuals involved in the onboarding of SOLES graduate students. Your identities will remain anonymous throughout the study.

If you are willing to participate in my research and complete **a 5-minute survey and a 30-minute phone interview, simply respond to this email by Thursday, December 3rd to let me know that you would like to participate.** I will then follow up to provide the survey and schedule your interview time.

Please let me know if you have any questions regarding the study and your involvement. Your participation is greatly appreciated!

Appendix B: Follow Up Email to Confirmed Participants with Survey link

Hi <<Participant Name>>,

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in my study!

As mentioned previously, I am conducting a study to understand the factors contributing to a sense of belonging amongst SOLES graduate students. This study aims to identify the areas of improvement in SOLES onboarding practices and contribute to the research and narratives regarding the graduate student experience.

The study consent form is provided below. If you agree to participate in the study and acknowledge consent, **please complete the following anonymous survey by Monday, December 21, 2020** (it should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete): https://usd.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_eY86wsgncKuqhAp

I will follow-up in the next few weeks with an invitation to continue the study by scheduling a 30-minute one-on-one interview to discuss your graduate student onboarding experience and sense of belonging at SOLES.

Feel free to get in touch if you have any questions.

With gratitude,

Shannon

Appendix C: Research Participant Consent Form

University of San Diego Institutional Review Board Research Participant Consent Form

For the research study entitled:
A look into the graduate student transition into grad school

I. Purpose of the research study

Shannon Patino is a student in the Department of Leadership Studies 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 identify factors influencing sense of belonging amongst USD SOLES graduate students to better foster authentic peer-to-peer interactions and promote support and trust through onboarding programs and procedures.

II. What you will be asked to do

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

Complete one 25-question questionnaire that asks you questions about your age, ethnicity, onboarding experience (if applicable), transition into grad school, student involvement and factors that influence your sense of belonging as a graduate student.

And/or, participate in a 30-minute private interview about your experience with belonging at USD

You will be audio recorded during this interview.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 40 minutes.

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:

San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339

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 influence of graduate admissions' onboarding programs on graduate student sense of belonging

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 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 not 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) Shannon Patino

Email: spatino@sandiego.edu

Phone: (619) 800 2565

2) David Karp

Email: dkarp@sandiego.edu

Office Phone: (619) 260 4289

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

Signature of Investigator

Date

Appendix D: Enhancing Graduate Student Onboarding Programming to Strengthen Graduate Student Sense of Belonging

About Survey

Enhancing Graduate Student Onboarding Programming to Strengthen Graduate Student Sense of Belonging and Ease the Transition into Graduate School

Action Research Survey

by Shannon Patino - MA in Higher Education Leadership Student

Q1 Please select the SOLES graduate program you are enrolled in:

- ☐ MA in Counseling, Clinical Mental Health Counseling (1)
- ☐ MA in Counseling, School Counseling (2)
- ☐ MA in Marital and Family Therapy (3)
- ☐ MA in Higher Education Leadership Studies (4)
- ☐ MA in Leadership Studies (5)
- ☐ MA in Nonprofit Leadership and Management (6)
- ☐ MEd in Curriculum and Instruction (7)
- ☐ MEd in TESOL, Literacy, & Culture (8)
- ☐ PhD in Education for Social Justice (9)
- ☐ PhD in Leadership Studies (10)
- ☐ PhD in Leadership Studies (Hybrid) (11)

Q2 When did you start your program?



- ☐ Term and Year (Ex. Fall 2019) (1)
-

Please answer the following questions regarding your onboarding and graduate student life experience:

Q4 When you think of a 'sense of belonging', what three words first come to mind for you?





Q5 How would you rate your sense of belonging USD

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

within SOLES ()	
within your cohort ()	

Q6 How would you rate the impact of the following factors on your sense of belonging at USD?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10









Peer-to-peer support (mentor collective, socials with cohort, interaction with student ambassadors, etc.) ()	
Faculty engagement (office hours, lunch with Dean, etc) ()	
Involvement opportunities (student organizations, grad student life events, etc.) ()	
Resources and institutional support (Writing Center, Copley Library, Career Services, etc.) ()	

Q7 Select all the on-boarding programs you participated in:

- ☐ Newly Admitted SOLES Facebook Page (1)
 - ☐ Newly Admitted Student Webinars (2)
 - ☐ Student Ambassador Outreach (3)
 - ☐ Incoming Student Social Hour (4)
 - ☐ Graduate Student Org Open House (5)
 - ☐ Orientation Videos (6)
 - ☐ Program Orientation (7)
 - ☐ Did not participate in any of the programs listed (8)
-

Q8 How would you rate the influence the following played on your sense of belonging at USD?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Newly Admitted Student Webinars ()	
Newly Admitted Student Webinars ()	
Student Ambassador Outreach ()	
Incoming Student Social Hour ()	
Grad School Connect ()	
Orientation Videos ()	
Graduate Student Org Open House ()	
Program Orientation ()	

Q9 Describe your agreement level regarding Orientation in the following statements:

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Somewhat agree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat disagree (5)	Disagree (6)	Strongly disagree (7)
Orientation provided resources for navigating the transition into grad school (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Orientation allowed me to build relationships with peers (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Orientation allowed me to build relationships with faculty (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q10 How would you rate your ease of building peer relationships?

	Easy (1)	Somewhat easy (2)	Neutral (3)	Somewhat challenging (4)	Challenging (5)
1 (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q11 How would you rate your transition into grad school?

	Easy (1)	Somewhat easy (2)	Neutral (3)	Somewhat challenging (4)	Challenging (5)
1 (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q12 What student organizations are you involved with and briefly provide the reason for getting involved:

Q13 Has remote learning made it difficult to feel a part of the SOLES/USD community?/

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ Somewhat (2)
- ☐ No (3)

Q14 Please explain:

Please answer the following demographic questions:

Q15 What is your age range?

- ☐ 21-25 (1)
 - ☐ 25-30 (2)
 - ☐ 30-39 (3)
 - ☐ 40-49 (4)
 - ☐ 50-59 (5)
 - ☐ 60 or older (6)
-

Q16 What is your gender?

- ☐ Female (1)
 - ☐ Male (2)
 - ☐ Non-binary/third gender (3)
 - ☐ Prefer to self-describe (4) _____
 - ☐ Prefer not to say (5)
-

Q17 Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community?

- ☐ Yes (1)
 - ☐ No (2)
 - ☐ Prefer not to disclose (3)
-

Q18 What is your race or ethnicity? (Select all that apply to you)

- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native (1)
 - ☐ Asian (2)
 - ☐ Black or African American (3)
 - ☐ Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin of any race (4)
 - ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (5)
 - ☐ White (6)
 - ☐ Race and Ethnicity Unknown (8)
 - ☐ Prefer not to disclose (9)
 - ☐ Other (10) _____
-

Q19 Are you a DACA or Undocumented student?

- ☐ Yes (1)
 - ☐ No (2)
 - ☐ Prefer not to disclose (3)
-

Q20 Are you an active duty service member or a veteran?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (3)
-

Q21 What is your employment status?

- ☐ Part-time (1)
- ☐ Full-time (2)
- ☐ Internship/Assistantship (3)
- ☐ Full-time student (4)
-

Q22 What is your marital status?

- ☐ Single (1)
- ☐ Married (2)
- ☐ Other (3) _____
- ☐ Prefer not to disclose (4)
-

Q23 Do you have children?

- ☐ Yes (1)
- ☐ No (2)
-

Thank you for completing the survey!

If you are willing to continue the study by participating in a 30 minute one-on-one interview related to the topic of graduate student sense of belonging at SOLES, please email Shannon Patino at spatino@sandiego.edu.

Your continued participation is of great value to this research.

End of Block: Default Question Block

Appendix E: Recruitment Email for One-on-One Interviews

Hi <<Participant Name>>,

It has been a while since I have followed up regarding the next cycle of my action research project.

If you completed the Enhancing Student Onboarding survey, thank you. If you have not yet completed the anonymous survey and are willing to participate, you can access the survey [here](#).

As a refresher, I am conducting a study to understand the factors contributing to a sense of belonging amongst SOLES graduate students. This study aims to identify the areas of improvement in SOLES onboarding practices and contribute to the research and narratives regarding the graduate student experience.

In the next cycle of my research, I will be conducting individual interviews. **If you are willing to continue your participation in my study, please use the following link to schedule a 30-minute Zoom interview to discuss your graduate student onboarding experience and sense of belonging at SOLES:** <https://calendly.com/spatino-1/ar-graduate-student-belonging-interview>

Please review the updated consent form highlighting the change from phone to Zoom interview. ***Note:** by scheduling an interview, you acknowledge the update in the consent form and consent to your participation in the research.*

I greatly appreciate your time and value your participation.

Appendix F: Script for one-on-one interviews with SOLES graduate students.

Introduction to study: I am conducting research about graduate student sense of belonging and I am interested in your experiences as a SOLES graduate student. The purpose of the research is to improve the graduate student onboarding experience by understanding the factors that influence the sense of belonging among graduate students at the University of San Diego's School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES). This research has no known risks. This research will benefit the academic community because it helps us to understand the graduate student experience. Please know that I will do everything I can to protect your privacy. Your identity or personal information will not be disclosed in any publication that may result from the study.

Notes that are taken during the interview will be stored in a secure location. Would it be all right if I audiotaped our interview? Saying no to audio recording will have no effect on the interview.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Question #1 – What program are you enrolled in and when did you start your program?

Question #2 – Why did you choose the program at USD/SOLES?

Question #3 – How was your experience transitioning into graduate school?

Follow up to questions #3: What resources or workshops would have been helpful with your transition?

Context statement before continuing: Oxford languages defines “Belonging” as having an affinity, or natural liking, for a place or situation. A sense of belonging can also mean sense of community.

Question #4 – When would you say you began to feel a sense of belonging at USD?

Question #5 – What challenges or barriers influenced your sense of belonging?

Question #6 – As a newly admitted student, did onboarding programs like newly admitted student webinars, orientation and Facebook contribute to your sense of belonging?

Questions #7 – How could USD/SOLES improve the graduate student onboarding experience?

Appendix G: Cycle three Restorative Circle design

The Belonging Circle

Preparation

The facilitator (keeper) and co-facilitator(s) should think about who will be participating in the circle, the time and location where it will take place, if there will be a seating order or the order that participants will share if in a virtual format, and whether different or additional questions need to be asked to generate the values and develop the guidelines and conduct the various rounds based on the goal and intention of the circle. Additionally, the facilitator and co-facilitator(s) will need to decide if they would like participants to bring an item prior to the start of the circle. The facilitator and co-facilitator(s) may also find it helpful to create an outline beforehand with scripts as a guide.

PURPOSE To facilitate peer-to-peer relations; Help incoming SOLES graduate students find a sense of connection and belonging, build trust and community.

MATERIALS Bring talking piece, centerpiece item(s), paper, markers, or colored pencils printouts of “Tree of Life” and “Clance IP Scale” handouts.

For virtual settings:

- Talking piece: Assign a gesture, imaginary object, or ask participants to prepare an item of their choosing for the talking piece
- Centerpiece: Ask participants to place centerpiece items in front of them or somewhere visible.
- Tree of Life Activity: Send activity to participants ahead of time so they can print or draw their tree.
- Clance IP Scale: Send activity to participants virtually.

PREPARATION Arrange chairs in a circle and have participants sit in assigned seats or wherever they would like. For virtual settings: Assign a speaking order that will be followed throughout the circle process or create various speaking orders for each activity or round.

Keeper: *Welcome to the space of the Circle. Circles are a restorative justice practice that originated from Indigenous cultures and symbolizes that everything is interconnected with distinct parts that are balanced, equally valuable, cyclical, and contribute to the whole. Circles create a safe space that supports and encourages all participants to “speak their truth respectfully to one another on an equal basis and to seek a deeper understanding of themselves and others” (Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis, 61).*

MINDFULNESS MOMENT

Keeper: *Let us begin the circle process by taking a moment to pause. Please close your eyes, breathe, and take a minute to set an intention for the Circle today (allow attendees to sit in silence for approximately 1-2 minutes)*

OPENING

Keeper: *To open the circle, I would like to share a quote about belonging by Brené Brown called “Belonging starts with self-acceptance”.*

“The truth is: Belonging starts with self-acceptance. Your level of belonging, in fact, can never be greater than your level of self-acceptance, because believing that you’re enough what gives you the courage to be authentic, vulnerable, and imperfect.”

EXPLORING VALUES AND GENERATING THE CIRCLE GUIDELINES

Keeper: *Before we continue to the circle rounds, it is important for us to identify values and then generate guidelines that support the values important to the group. **The keeper(s) will ask participants to grab a piece of paper and writing tool and write down one value that they feel is important for the Circle. Allow approx. 5 minutes and then invite participants to share the value they have chosen and then have them place the paper in the center of the center making sure that each value remains visible. For virtual settings:***

Keeper: *Thank you everyone for sharing. Based on the values that have been shared by everyone in the group, what are some community guidelines we would like to establish for the Circle? Guidelines should be agreements that align with the values and create a safe space for everyone to speak their truth, but not rigid. For instance, speak and listen from the heart. **Ask participants to share guidelines/agreements and write them down somewhere that will remain visible to the group.***

INTRODUCE “ROUNDS”

Keeper: *A “round” is a pass of the talking piece around the Circle. The Keeper poses a question and, as a participant, usually answers first. The keeper then passes the talking piece to the person to his/her left or right. On the first round, participants are invited to say their name as well as respond to the question. Remember, it is always okay for a participant to pass. **For online settings: Keeper(s) will have prepared the order that students will follow for each round ahead of time and will post it in the chat.***

PRACTICE ROUND

Keeper: *Please introduce yourself by sharing your name, the program you are enrolled in, where you have lived or grew up, and anything else you would like to share with the group.*

CHECK-IN ROUND

Keeper: *How would you describe how you are feeling about starting graduate school using a metaphor such as the weather, food, movie, song, etc.?*

MAIN ACTIVITY #1 Sharing Self-Images and Learning about Others through Tree of Life Activity

Keeper: *For our first main activity, everyone will be completing the Tree of Life activity. This activity uses the tree as a metaphor for telling the story of one's life. Each participant will use a pre-drawn tree or draw your own to complete the activity. Things that must be included on the tree include:*

- a. Roots (where you come from – places, people, culture, activities, and organizations),*
- b. Grass (where you currently live and the activities you choose and enjoy to do on a daily or weekly basis)*
- c. Trunk (values, strengths, skills, and attributes),*
- d. Branches (hopes and dreams)*
- e. Leaves (names of those significant to you)*
- f. Fruits or Flowers (things passed down to you by the significant people on the leaves)*

Notes for Keeper: *Allow 30-40 minutes for participants to complete. Once finished, ask people to pair up with the person sitting next to them and share their pictures with their partners. Allow 5-10 minutes for this sharing. When participants have finished sharing with their partners, pass the talking piece around and invite participants to share their tree of life with everyone in the Circle:*

<https://nathanbweller.com/tree-life-simple-exercise-reclaiming-identity-direction-life-story/>

ROUND

I invite you to share your drawing and tell us what it says about you. After sharing the story of your picture, place it in the center of the circle.

The keeper should model by going first.

ROUND

What thoughts, feelings, or realizations are you sitting with regarding the Tree of Life activity?

ROUND

What is something you learned about others that interested or surprised you?

MAIN ACTIVITY #2 Imposter Syndrome Activity

Keeper: For our second main activity, please take 15-minutes to complete the [Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale \(CIPS\) test](#) created by psychologist Pauline Rose Clance, Ph.D., ABPP.

ROUND

What surprised you or didn't surprise you about your scores?

ROUND

In what situations or environments have you experienced feelings of imposter syndrome?

MAIN ACTIVITY #2 Belonging

ROUND

What role has belonging played in your life?

ROUND

Why does feeling like you belong matter?

ROUND

What do you feel belonging enables you to do at work and in life?

https://filecache.mediaroom.com/mr5mr_paypal/181050/01_Discussion%20Guide_Imposter%20Syndrome.pdf

CHECK-OUT ROUND

What are your main takeaways from this Belonging Circle?

CLOSING

Keeper: To close the circle, I would like to leave you with another quote by Brené Brown on belonging called “We are wired to love, to be loved, and to belong”.

A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick.

Thank you everyone for participating in the Circle!

This Circle is adapted from Boyes-Watson and Pranis, *Circle Forward: Building A Restorative School Community*, pp.148-149, pp.