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**Abstract Doctoral Defense**

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**Title: Perceptions of Belonging in Secondary Independent School: A Retrospective Case Study Comparing Experiences of Former Scholarship and Non-Scholarship Students**

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The purpose of this study was to determine the sense of belonging between low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students in the independent school setting by examining stories of their lived experience. This study builds on previous research in higher education that examined students' struggles to belong, which are particularly reported by minorities and other historically marginalized groups. The study aimed to reveal assets and barriers related to equity and access at secondary private schools through personal stories of students' experiences. Recently matriculated participants aged 18-21 from the same independent school in central New Hampshire were recruited through a snowball sampling method. Through this recruitment approach, 26 individuals participated. Participants recounted their experiences during their time at the secondary independent school. Using a narrative inquiry approach with semi-structured interviews, data were analyzed through an ongoing and iterative process. All data were aggregated and analyzed using hand coding by transcribing each interview, coding the data, and determining interrelated themes for each of the different groups of codes. Findings from this study confirm four integrated concepts: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions. Each of these concepts may impact an individual's ability to feel accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment. Results address a gap in the literature, specifically how students perceive a sense of belonging compared between low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship independent school students. In contrast to previous research, results from this study indicate that a sense of belonging, as determined by the individual storyteller, was not significantly different between the two groups of students. Results from this study determine this was due to a concerted effort on behalf of the secondary independent school to promote a sense of community. Findings from this study have the potential to inform independent schools' equitable practices, especially among diverse groups.

*Keywords:* Belonging, competencies, opportunities, motivations, perceptions, lived experience, peer association, place attachment, scholarship, storytelling, community.

Perceptions of Belonging in Secondary Independent School: A Retrospective Case Study  
Comparing Experiences of Former Scholarship and Non-Scholarship Students

By

Daniel W. Love

A DISSERTATION

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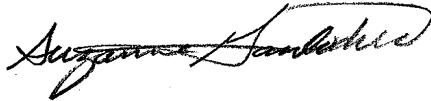
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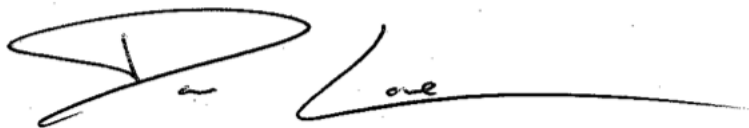
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Daniel W. Love, Author

**Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. My wife, Amy, for her love and support and who creates a sense of belonging in every class she teaches. My children, Matilda and Gordon, thank you for making others feel accepted, respected, included, and supported.

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**Doctor of Education: Leadership, Learning and Community**

Perceptions of Belonging in Secondary Independent School: A Retrospective Case Study  
Comparing Experiences of Former Scholarship and Non-Scholarship Students

Daniel W. Love, Plymouth State University

Dissertation Defense: November 15, 2022

Executive Summary: November 27, 2022

**Introduction:** The purpose of this study is to determine the sense of belonging between two groups of students, low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students by examining stories of their lived experience.

**Problem of Practice:** This research examines the sense of belonging between two groups of students in secondary, independent schools — those on financial aid scholarships and those that can afford to pay full price for an education that often costs over \$70,000.00 a year.

**Research Method:** This qualitative case study uses narrative inquiry to listen to participants reflect on their perceptions of independent, secondary school. Participants for the study were 26 former independent, secondary students from the same institution. Based on Allen et al.'s (2021) integrated framework of belonging, the 18–21-year-old interview participants answered open-ended questions (Appendix A) reflecting on their lived experience to discover sense of belonging in an independent, secondary school.

**Summary of Findings:** Sense of belonging was found to be equal among two groups of students, low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students. Educational practitioners can foster a sense of belonging by focusing on four interrelated areas of belonging (Allen et al., 2021): motivations (needs or desires to connect with others); competencies (positive examples of feeling able and skilled to belong); perceptions (subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experience); and opportunities (access to people, groups, places, and times that enabled belonging to occur).

**Limitation(s) of Study:** This study focused on equity and access of low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students through a snowball recruitment process at one New England independent, secondary school. Therefore, limitations exist in the homogeneous student sample in terms of race and geographic area and small same size of one institution.

**Implications/Significance of Study:** Since independent schools were originally created for affluent student and the number of scholarship students attending them is increase, more educational intuitions need to ensure all students feel personally welcomed, respected, included, and supported by others in the school environment.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem**

The percentage of elementary and secondary students who are enrolled in independent (non-public) schools decreased by 11% percent from 1999 to 2017 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS, 2021) reported that in the school years from 2016 to 2021 school years, the number of students receiving financial aid to attend schools has increased. In 2016, the percentage was 23% and in 2021 on average it was up to 27% of all independent schools (NAIS, 2021).

### **Propose of the Study**

There are two groups of students in secondary, independent schools, those on financial aid scholarship and those that can afford to pay full price for an education that often costs over \$70,000.00 a year (NAIS, 2021). K-12 private schools, or independent schools were originally created for affluent student whose parents could afford a non-public school education (Klaus, 2018). In 2021, the number of scholarship students attending independent elementary schools were up 36% in all independent K-12 schools (NAIS, 2021).

While increased percentages of scholarship students shows a positive movement toward closing the equity gap, there are studies that have investigated the lived experience of scholarship students at the independent, secondary school level, (Allen et al., 2018). Independent schools have an opportunity to decrease the equity gap by offering admission to low-income students who would not otherwise be able to attend

with scholarship funding. However, do the students an equal sense of belonging at the same institution.

From studies of students in higher education, low-income students experience a lower sense of belonging compared to non-scholarship students (Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Determining who gets funds and who does not receive tuition assistance creates two groups of students, non-scholarship students and scholarship students, the haves and the have nots. Thus, examining financial aid (or scholarship) students' experience in independent, secondary schools will shed light on the lived experience of an important and potentially overlooked group of students, specifically the potential differences in their sense of belonging in a school social environment (Allen et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2021, Bettencourt, 2021).

### **Terms**

NAIS (2021) offered shared terminology used by individuals in the educational field. For the purpose of this study, many of the terms outlined by NAIS will be utilized.

These terms are as follows:

- *Belonging* is defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80).
- *Merit-based scholarship* is a financial award based on academic success (NAIS, 2020).
- *Narratives* are defined as "identity constructs, story elaborations, and contextual embeddings" (Martens et al., 2007, p. 1107).

- *Need-based scholarship* is a financial award based on academic success (NAIS, 2020).
- *K-12 School* is a broad term for an elementary and secondary school with grades from kindergarten to twelfth grade.
- *Scholarship student* is a student receiving a financial aid award of more than 50% of the cost of their schooling experience (Hurst, 2010).
- *Tuition-dependent independent schools* are defined as non-public school institutions that rely on tuition to provide more than 60 % of total revenue (Shewey, 2019).
- *Private school* is a non-public school.

### ***Scholarship and Non-Scholarship Students***

Independent schools have noticed a trend in even the most competitive schools, increasing pricing and affordability concerns for financial needs families (NAIS, 2020). This study aims to examine a related concern, students' sense of belonging in two groups of students, low-income scholarship students, and non-scholarship students. The participants of the study will be ages 18–21, and this study will use retrospective accounts of students' perceptions of belonging. Retrospective accounts are beneficial for this study because the participants are no longer in secondary school and more time has passed to allow them greater distance and thus develop a greater perspective. The use of recently matriculated students allows the sample groups time, distance, and in many cases a comparative basis (Crabbe, 2019; Hudley et al., 2009).

Although independent schools rely on tuition for most of their budget, typically 40% or less of the operating budget funds are funneled back to the school in the form of

scholarships to deserving students, either need-based or merit-based scholarships (Balosi & Hernandez, 2016). Determining who gets funds and who does not need or receive funds creates two groups of students, non-scholarship students and scholarship students, the haves and the have-nots.

Private schools have an opportunity to decrease the equity gap by offering admission to low-income students who would not be able to attend without scholarship funding. However, in studies of students in higher education, low-income students experience a lower sense of belonging compared to non-scholarship students (Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2013).

Since the 1970's more than a tenth of the American student population has been enrolled in elementary and secondary private schools (Murphy, 1999). K-12 private schools, or independent schools, were originally created for affluent students whose parents could afford a private school education (Klaus, 2018). In 2021, the number of scholarship students attending private elementary and secondary schools was up to 36% in all independent K-12 schools (NAIS, 2021). While the increased percentage of scholarship students indicates a positive movement toward closing the equity gap, there are few studies that have investigated the lived experience of scholarship students at the elementary and secondary private school levels.

### ***Importance of Belonging***

The need to belong is important for all ages (Allen et al., 2018, 2021; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Jury et al., 2019; Leibowitz et al., 2019; Maslow, 1943; Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013; Sime et al., 2021; Vaz et al., 2015).

Belonging “may be particularly relevant to the unique and specific needs and challenges

of adolescents (age 12-18) compared to other developmental stages” (Allen et al., 2018, p. 3). Struggles to belong are particularly evident in minorities and other groups that have been historically marginalized by mainstream cultures (Allen et al., 2021). Studies suggest the effects of stressors relating to belonging can be more intense for those who identify with marginalized groups (Walton & Brady, 2017). Such groups include those from racial minorities, those who identify as non-binary or sexually diverse, or individuals with attitudes or behaviors that are different from the norms of society, such as those with mental health issues or disabilities (Allen et al., 2021; Gardner et al., 2019; Rainey et al., 2018). Understanding and fostering a sense of belonging for independent school scholarship students may be crucial for institutions that wish to support access and equity for these minority groups in order to ensure these marginalized students feel supported, respected and included in the school’s social environment. This study focuses on whether and how two distinct groups of students, scholarship and non-scholarship, form a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2021) in a secondary independent school setting.

### ***Definitions of Belonging***

Definitions of belonging have differed through the years and have had various focal points of research. A meta-analysis of constructs of belonging shows distinctions between the state and sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018). Studies suggest the state of belonging is influenced by day-to-day events and annoyances (Ma, 2003; Sedgwick & Rougeau, 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Definitions of the constructs of belongingness and belonging have lacked conceptual clarity and consistency across studies (Allen et al., 2021). The key components of belonging most relevant to this study are student connections to place and culture, and applied to school-based setting, relationships with

other students and faculty, and feelings toward their school (Allen et al., 2018, 2021; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Jury et al., 2019; Leibowitz et al., 2019; Sime et al., 2021; Vaz et al., 2015). For the purposes of this study, belonging is defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80).

### ***Belonging is a Basic Human Need***

In the 1940s, American psychologist Abraham Maslow developed a list of basic human needs. Love and belonging were included in Maslow's list of primal needs (Maslow, 1943). Griffin and Tyrell have contended that humans have nine primal needs (2006). Their list includes having fun; feeling life is enjoyable; feeling part of and belonging to a wider community; feeling safe and secure day-to-day; and having a sense of control and influence over life's events (Griffin & Tyrell, 2006). These are all relevant to the school environment.

### ***Belonging in School***

A sense of school belonging affects a student's emotions, motivations, and academic functionality (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). To foster students' sense of school belonging, schools as communities must make the student feel emotionally connected and involved (Sime et al., 2021). Sense of belonging within a school community integrates students' relationships with others, support, connectedness, mattering, value, respect, and importance (Strayhorn, 2012). Studies have examined a sense of belonging as the main factor in better understanding students' experiences, specifically for students with marginalized backgrounds (Bettencourt, 2021).

### ***Students' Sense of Not Belonging in Schools***

The feeling of belongingness represents a dynamic, internal experience of strong psychological connection, especially when concerned with school membership (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Jury et al., 2019; Leibowitz et al., 2019; Sime et al., 2021; Vaz et al., 2015). Understanding the need to belong is important; however, the feeling of not belonging is also a concern for the health of students. More specifically, social isolation is a health concern. A meta-analysis of 70 studies showed the health risks associated with remaining socially isolated are equal to smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Allen et al., 2021).

There is a correlation between a sense of belonging and academic performance (Allen et al., 2018). In a 2016 meta-study of 51 studies on belonging in secondary school settings, on average, one in four adolescents were categorized as having low feelings of belongingness and about one in five stated low levels of academic engagement (Allen et al., 2018). As Allen et al. (2021) research stated the following on not belonging, "The negative effects of not belonging or the feeling of being rejected include antisocial behavior, increased risk for mental illness, lower immune functioning, physical illness, and early mortality" (p. 91). The negative effects of belonging, non-belonging, not belonging, and lack of belonging deserve more attention in current research.

### *Narratives of Schools*

One factor that affects a students' sense of belonging is a student's connection with the identity of their school. Students at independent secondary schools understand the identity of the school first through the stories they hear about it (Feldman et al., 2014). The individual stories students hear add up to a narrative (Pekar, 2021). For this study, narratives are defined as "identity constructs, story elaborations, and contextual embeddings" (Martens et al., 2007, p. 1107). Stories are a subset of narrative (Feldman et

al., 2004). Narratives of schools are used to have a collection of stories to describe the identity of their organization.

These accounts, narratives, and repeated stories help people create meaning (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). The narratives create a collective understanding of individual identity for the members of the school (Brown, 2005; Brown, 2006; Huy, 2006; Parada & Vilad , 2010). These narratives are shared to create a collective identity through the tales insiders tell each other, write in documents, and offer on the school website (PoliARC, 2021). The narratives the students are exposed to may influence their sense of identity in the school (Korpela, 1989). The themes, especially the repeated themes, influence meaning within an organization (Myers, 2002). Research suggests students' perceptions of their school identity are organized in narratives different from their lived experiences (D' Argenbeau et al., 2014; Dailey & Browning, 2014; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Yost et al., 2015). However, the implications of form, function, and retelling of narratives have been given little attention in research on the importance of belonging, especially from the perspectives of low-income students (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Little research has delved into the narratives of school culture and the experience of equity and a sense of belonging for scholarship students and non-scholarship students.

### **Global Perspective**

Research has been focused on belonging and the lived experience of diverse populations of students for years (Allen et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2021; Bettencourt, 2021; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Jury et al., 2019; Leibowitz et al., 2019; Sime et al., 2021; Vaz et al., 2015). The sense of belonging or feeling of being at home changes according to the geographical location. Where someone considers home might be where they live

currently and not necessarily where they grew up living (Morley, 2001). A sense of community and community identity, specifically, a “sense of personal connectedness” and a “sense of personal support” found in an international town, Durham City, England, has been correlated to a sense of personal belonging or “personal settledness” (Puddifoot, 2003, p. 88). This taxonomy can be replicated in the lived experience of a school community, e.g. Reay et al. (2009) shared findings of how working-class higher education students develop qualities of resilience and coping with adversity when they entered an elite European university and developed responses the authors called habitus or “re-fashioning” of themselves to meet their environment (p. 1103). The concept of working-class students adapting to other students of privilege is not new to the research of belonging (Bettencourt, 2021).

Two studies of youth in Naples, Italy focused on the role of culture in place identity and place attachment. Location was determined to be a basis for attachment and more importantly avoidant attachment, leaving a place someone does not feel you belong (Arcidiacono et al., 2007). Belonging is a dynamic process, and negative belonging can also occur when youth have feelings of disinterest and even ambivalence toward the location in which they are living (Arcidiacono et al., 2007). International research shows it is important to recognize there are levels of belonging concerning social location, emotional attachment to groupings, and ethical and political value systems in the location in which someone lives (Yuval-Davis, 2006). While people can identify exclusively with one identity category, belonging to a location is connected to a plurality of differences such as gender, class, race and ethnicity, sexuality, stages of life, ability, etc. (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

School belonging is a focus of international attention. Craggs and Kelly (2018) studied UK secondary students who underwent “managed moves” or “fresh starts” at new schools (p. 56). They acknowledged a sense of belonging has a significant effect on primary and secondary students’ emotional, motivational, and academic functioning; therefore, they studied students’ views on school belonging among students who had less of a choice to move to a new school (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). A meta-analysis of 51 studies ( $N = 67,378$ ) showed teacher support and positive personal characteristics (academic motivation, emotional stability, engagement in extracurricular activities, and belief in school safety) were the strongest predictors of school belonging among secondary students (Allen et al., 2018). However, The Programme for International Student Assessment demonstrated that as of 2003, across 42 countries, 8354 schools and 224,058 15-year-olds, “one in four adolescents were categorized as having low feelings of belongingness and about one in five reported low levels of academic engagement” (as cited in Allen et al., 2018, p. 3).

When belonging is increased, there is a significant link to the improvement in academic performance as stated in the International Study in Maths and Science (as cited in Riley, 2019). According to Allen et al. (2018) and Riley (2019), the larger conceptual problem is to identify and compare students’ sense of belonging and to research the perception of school identity of different types of students’ lived experiences.

### **Local Context**

New England in the United States is a rich environment for independent schools. Records from 2020 show that 579,299 students attend independent elementary and secondary schools (NAIS, 2020). There are 1,233 independent elementary and secondary

schools in the United States. (NCES, 2019). Of those in the United States, 129 independent elementary and secondary schools are in New England, according to the Association of Independent Schools of New England (2021). All the New England independent schools have scholarship students and non-scholarship students.

Belonging is associated with place, especially a student's school. Forty participants participated in a New York City area study that showed the importance of the concept of belonging, protection, and comfort in their public school (Manzo, 2005). More specifically to students in schools, a 2013 study by Soria et al. (2013) used Tinto's theory of student departure as a framework to explore the differences in academic and social integration between working-class and middle upper-class students at large, public research universities. Findings concluded non-retention could be attributed to non-belonging, especially among different socioeconomic strata (Soria et al., 2013). In other words, students leave schools if they feel like they do not belong.

Non-belonging is an issue of equity that schools need to consider. The feeling of school belonging, or sense of school membership is the feeling of being personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in a school environment (Goodenow, 1993). A study conducted in the United States suggests school belonging reduces as students transition through secondary school (Vaz et al., 2015). Thus, understanding a sense of belonging is necessary to detect early. Yet, there are surprisingly few studies that have focused on assessing students' understanding of what the school environment means as a space of (non)belonging, and as a collective experience in the process of belonging (Sime et al., 2021).

Multi-institutional research involving higher education students suggests that working-class students experience a lower sense of belonging (Soria & Bultman, 2014). The same research could be conducted in secondary institutions to determine if working-class or scholarship students experience a lower sense of belonging than their non-scholarship peers. Researchers increasingly have examined the sense of belonging for students from a marginalized background in higher education. The findings of one study show that university students from marginalized backgrounds have more varied academic experiences than their more affluent peers (Bettencourt, 2021). The working-class, higher education students who experienced a lower sense of belonging also experienced less time studying, interacted less with faculty, and completed fewer credit hours than the higher socio-economic students (Bettencourt, 2021). Bettencourt's (2021) study advocates for future research to examine the sense of belonging across institutional types such as elite private institutions.

### **Advocacy and Ethics**

This study aims to identify and compare student sense of belonging in low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students by examining and theming stories they share of their lived experience. The specific problem of practice is that of equity and access for all individuals. Private elementary and secondary schools were created to offer non-public K-12 school options; they were not designed for everyone (McPherson & Schapiro, 1997). In 2021 students on financial aid were up to 36% in all U.S. independent elementary and secondary schools (National Association of Independent Schools, 2021). Making private school education accessible to those who previously could not access it becomes a point of equity and access, yet little is known

about whether and how the experience of students receiving financial aid develop a sense of belonging, especially among secondary students.

### **Advocating for a Need to Belong**

In Maslow's (1943) list of basic human needs, love and belonging were included as well as safety. In an increasingly complex world, people search for safety in a community (Morley, 2001). Personal investment in a community is more likely to be assured when a person feels membership to a community, as in they see themselves as being like others in the group (Fisher & Sonn, 1999). Individuals without the ability to move from their community remain embedded in its social structures and face many social obstacles and challenges (Keyes, 1998). Humans form attachments to place; however, these emotional attachments are different for every individual (Manzo, 2003). Belonging as an emotion is how attached an individual is to a particular place to create place-belonging (Antonsich, 2010).

However, a sense of belonging to a place is different for different people because emotional connection is different for gender, class, race and ethnicity, sexuality, stages of life, ability, affluence, or power in society (Arcidiacono et al., 2007; Fenster, 2004; Manzo, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2006). To understand different individuals' sense of belonging, this study proposes to examine independent secondary students' narratives of their lived experience.

### ***Narratives Share Stories of Belonging***

In this study, narratives are personal constructs of our identity that we share with others to connect with the context of our environment (Martens et al., 2007). Stories are a subset of narrative (Feldman, et al., 2004). Accounts, narratives, and especially retold

stories help people create and share meaning (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Narratives create a collective understanding of identity (Brown, 2005; Brown, 2006; Huy 2006; Parada & Viladás, 2010). Different groups share common or collective understandings of personal identity, such as how included they feel in their social groupings (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Parada & Viladás, 2010).

One aspect that aids in the creation of collective identity and sensemaking is the acknowledgment and acceptance of an organization's stories (Boje, 1995). Stories from a story organization or storytelling system (Boje, 1995). Stories that are organized, corrected, retold, and recorded (Meyers, 2002) are more likely to be remembered. The process of storytelling is iterative and recursive, assigning meaning to concepts that are used for future sensemaking (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Future sensemaking could include a sense of belonging.

Stories are shared in organizations to create a collective identity through the tales employees tell each other, write in company documents, offer on websites, and created in material, especially through company founders (Brown, 2006; Parada & Dawson, 2017). However, there is a danger of only telling a single story (Adichie, 2009). Novelist Chimamanda Adichie explained her research and lived experience of founding her authentic cultural voice in a 2006 TedTalk. She cautioned that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding. She also explained the need for everyone to tell their own story, as stories are data used to create identity. Furthermore, Antonisch (2010) postulated that belonging is used as a synonym for identity, especially national or ethnic identity.

Individuals share stories as ways to build relationships and demonstrate levels of attachment to a place (Manzo, 2003). One of the most important aspects of sharing stories that show identity is acknowledging which stories are retold (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Through time and curation, individual stories add up to a collected narrative collaboratively created through generations (Parada & Dawson, 2017). One does not make up narratives; one finds stories, holds on to them, and remembers them (Pekar, 2021). To understand the notion of belonging to a place is to understand the stories one tells about a place (Antonisch, 2010). Stories convey a sense of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment (Hook, 2009 as cited in Antonisch, 2010).

There is value in retelling stories because they aid in creating understanding. Stories can also help in decision-making (Czarniawska & Skoldberg, 2003; Martin et al., 1983). Selected stories carry common content but also create a context to help with decision-making. Stories lead to data-informed understanding and future conclusions (Zwack et al., 2016). There is power in voice and explanation of culture, especially if it is to gain inclusive participation. However, the implications of form, function, and retelling of stories have been given little attention in the importance of decision-making (Dailey & Browning, 2014).

Previous research has shown the implications of sensemaking (Boje, 1995), meta patterns (Myers, 2002), and organization of complex and often competing ideas (Mailis, 2005) in narratives. This study will explore whether and how school identity stories match the lived experience of both groups: low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students. This is largely a problem of equal access for all individuals, in other words, ethics of justice (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Schools, especially independent

schools that were originally designed for the affluent, must reflect the experiences of all students, especially marginalized groups.

### **Focused Problem of Practice**

Research from the UK on working-class students in elite universities suggests the challenges of self-scrutiny and a nearly constant desire to re-fashion oneself (Reay et al., 2009). Additional comparative data on the correlation between socioeconomic level and sense of belonging between two college-age student groups, one in the United States and the other in China, showed the more students are uncertain of their social status and identity, the less they feel socially connected with their peers (Jury et al., 2019). Thus, there is a need to study if prestige is connected to belonging.

According to Allen (2021), “Struggles to belong are particularly evident in minorities and other groups that have been historically marginalized by mainstream culture” (p. 89). Regarding working-class students’ sense of belonging, there are recent studies in higher education showing the greater the adversity for students, the more they develop a sense of resilience (Bettencourt, 2021). However, there lacks significant research on how this affects secondary students. Vaz et al. (2015) researched belongingness in early secondary schools, yet they treated belonging the same for all student groups. There is a gap in research on how students perceive a sense of belonging compared between low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students. Examining the personal stories of students’ lived experiences may reveal assets and barriers that impact equity and access for all individuals at a secondary private school level.

**Central Research Questions**

- 1) How does the sense of belonging formed in a secondary school setting compare between two groups of students: scholarship and non-scholarship?
- 2) How/where is belonging forming in the following interrelated areas: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions? (Allen et al., 2021).
  - a) Competencies: Students having a set of skills and abilities needed to connect and experience belonging.
  - b) Opportunities: Students having the ability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur.
  - c) Motivations: Students need or desire to connect with others.
  - d) Perceptions: Students' subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experience.

**Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework**

This study aims to identify and compare students' sense of belonging by examining the stories of two groups of students' lived experience. The two groups are scholarship and non-scholarship students who recently graduated from independent secondary schools. The following section connects two different theoretical frameworks: narrative inquiry, and an integrated framework of belonging. These frameworks connect one to another to create a path for the stories of individual students to share their sense of belonging. While the research is qualitative in nature, interviewing students in independent schools, both scholarship and non-scholarship students, will provide the data for the study of similarities and differences of belonging in a secondary school environment.

### **Theoretical Analysis**

To understand the sense of belonging in the stories, an integrated framework of belonging (Allen, et al., 2021) is used. The framework helps this researcher to have a manner to code the student stories into themes. The framework posits that competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions are central elements in strategies that can be used to better understand the sense of belonging an individual has to an environment, in this case, an independent, secondary school environment.

#### ***Four Components of Belonging***

As a dynamic social system, Allen et al. (2021) described an integrated framework for defining and measuring belonging:

- *Competencies for Belonging* is having a set of skills and abilities needed to recognize and experience when one is experiencing belonging; Competencies is the first aspect of the Belonging Framework (Allen et al., 2021).
- *Opportunities to Belong* is the availability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that allow for belonging to occur; it is the second component of the Belonging Framework (Allen et al., 2021).
- *Motivation to Belong* is the third component of the Belonging Framework (Allen et al., 2021). It is a need or desire to connect with others. Belonging motivation refers to the fundamental need for people to be known, needed, and cared for as well as seek social interaction and connection (Allen et al., 2021).
- *Perceptions of Belonging* is the fourth aspect of belonging according to the Belonging Framework (Allen et al., 2021). A person's feelings and thoughts

concerning their experience, in other words, their perceptions, become their understanding of their lived experience (Allen et al., 2021).

### ***Narrative Inquiry of Students' Stories of Belonging***

Narratives can create meaning and shape a common identity within institutions. Schools can be storytelling systems (Boje, 1991). Narratives are combinations of numerous stories that are found, not made (Parada & Dawson, 2017; Pekar, 2021). Narratives aid an organization in a number of ways, such as motivating the listener to hear institutional memories (Glonek & King, 2014). The identities of schools can be shaped by continuously evolving shared narratives (Brown & Humphrey, 2005).

Storytelling is not new. Early stories were told of hunts, tribes, and origins of people (D' Argembeau et al., 2013). However, stories and storytelling has evolved over time (Kowaleski, 2013). Stories continue to be an effective means of communication. This study's literature review will examine the research on the history of storytelling, what makes a good story, narrative theory, storytelling in different fields, the role of storytelling to explain or maintain the culture, the role of storytelling to create meaning and shape identity, identity and culture transmission, and finally the role of storytelling in the decision-making process of enrollment. A key aspect of these subsections is the role of stories being retold, which is paramount to narrative theory.

### ***Narrative Theory***

When Rhodes and Brown (2005) researched organizations, they used narrative theory to determine different areas in which each story could be organized. The areas included sensemaking, communication, politics and power, learning/change, and identity and identification (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Organizational identity is a construct of

narrative theory (Chreim, 2005). Narrative theory is determined by researchers as a discursive strategy (Boje, 1995). A narrative is a way of looking at an organization by what it tells of itself. Organizations' identities are linguistic constructs (Brown et al., 2005). Understanding an organization's identity both on the individual level and an institutional level illustrates the importance of narrative theory as a tool to view the linguistic resources of stories (Chreim, 2005). Brown (2006) used narrative theory as an approach to understanding collective identities and stated that "organizations' identities are constituted by the identity-relevant narratives that their participant's author about them" (p. 734). Rather than being psychological, organizational identity is discursive and rests in the collective identity stories people share in conversations, write in publications, and view in electronic media (Brown, 2006).

Stories are a subset of narratives (Feldman et al., 2004), and oral accounts, shared narratives, and other related strategies work to help people create meaning (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) in new situations or new roles at work. Stories create order where there could be confusion (Erasga, 2010). Erasga (2010) researched how sociologists purport storytelling is a form of narrative thinking. Storytelling needs an audience and a purpose.

Narrative theory can be used to explain meaning-making (Boje, 1991; Boje, 1995; Maitlis, 2005). The Disney company is an example of a storytelling business. They are a collective storytelling system that uses stories to share institutional memory (Boje, 1991). However, they are an organization that seeks to keep their stories honest and authentic to their original intent (Boje, 1995). They recognize that using stories as data is the purpose (Boje, 1995). Organizational sensemaking is a fundamentally social process involving

interactions of multiple constituents (Maitlis, 2005). Narrative theory shows the social process as purposeful.

Research shows how narratives help leverage resources by verbally illustrating an understandable identity for an entrepreneurial business (Martin, et al., 2007). Their large sample test shows the effects of storytelling on resource acquisition. This is perhaps the most direct comparison to this researcher's study of the impact of storytelling on independent school enrollment. Perhaps intentionally curating stories of identity within an independent school will positively influence the sense of belonging to an educational institution.

The research using narrative theory as the conceptual framework for understanding financial decision-making is important. However, the contributions of narrative theory regarding repetition also serve to better show the impact of storytelling. Stories are used as decision-making data (Feldman et al., 2004). Strategically focusing on which stories are told could benefit future school enrollment. When a story is told and retold, it tells something about the cultural life of the organization (Dailey & Brown, 2014). Narrative repetition influences the desired or undesired understandings of an organization's culture.

### ***Narrative Inquiry***

Bettencourt's (2021) study of belonging in higher education examined the sense of belonging using a narrative inquiry design that focused on students' lived experience of working-class students in secondary, private school education. Recognizing there could be similarities between working-class students and scholarship students, the

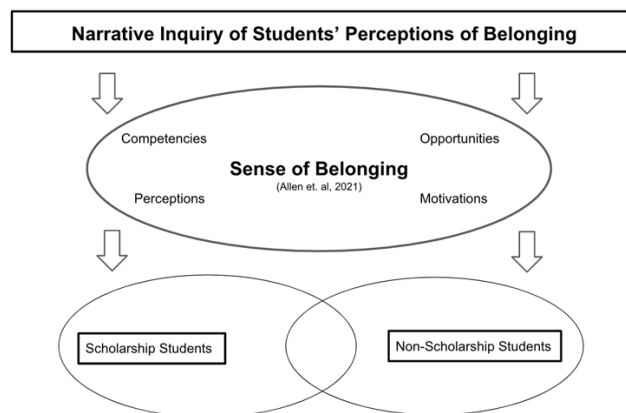
narratives of these two groups have importance for understanding a student's sense of connectedness or belonging (Sime et al., 2021).

### ***Sense of Belonging Framework***

Allen et al. (2021) shared an integrated framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging. Four interrelated components show the social, cultural, environmental, and temporal contexts and experiences that influence one another as an individual adapts to their lived experiences (Allen et al., 2021).

### **Figure 2.1**

#### *Sense of Belonging Framework*



*Note.* Framework adapted from Allen, K., Kern, M.L., Rozek, C., & Slavich, G. (2021). Belonging: A review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research. *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73(1), 93.

### **Empirical Analysis**

In three different empirical studies conducted by Jury et al. (2019) in two different countries, China and the United States, researchers investigated and determined low socioeconomic status (SES) students have a lower sense of belonging in college than high

SES students. Among the 235 U.S. undergraduates who participated in the study, participants perceived prestige was measured across a broad socioeconomic scale (Cheng et al., 2010). Nine statements were self-assessing an individual's perceived prestige; for example, "I am held in high esteem by those I know" and "my unique talents and abilities are recognized by others" (Jury et al., 2019, p. 359).

Participants also completed a 17-item measurement tool assessing their sense of belonging to college (Jury et al., 2019). Jury et al. (2019) used a seven-point scale to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the following sentences: "I fit in well at [name of university]" and "I feel comfortable at [name of university]" (p. 360).

In Jury et al.'s (2019) research, Study 2 had 327 U.S. participants. Study 3 had 394 Chinese students. These studies provided evidence that the lower students' subjective SES, the lower their self-attributed prestige, and that prestige mediated the relationship between students' subjective SES and their sense of belonging to college (Jury et al., 2019).

There were limitations to Jury et al.'s (2019) study, the first being that students could perceive their low SES was because of their low sense of belonging, instead of the other way around. Thus, the presented studies were correlational and implied that causality cannot be generated (Jury et al., 2019). Second, it should be noted there is a proximity between subjective SES and prestige meanings. Recognizing both constructs relate to the general notion of social status could impede reliability. This further emphasizes the need for further research and clear components of a belonging framework.

In a different qualitative study, Bettencourt (2021) examined how working-class students described their sense of belonging using a narrative inquiry interview model. Twenty-four work-class students in two public research institutions were interviewed using a narrative inquiry design that examined students' lived experience (Bettencourt, 2021). The genesis of the study was to understand the fostered sense of belonging for working-class students and offer the data to universities that wish to support access and equity.

The categorization of working-class students was used because of the connection to culture and identity beyond any single financial or educational variable (Bettencourt, 2021). The questions the students were asked included the following:

a) How connected do you feel on campus?; b) How supportive do you feel like [name of institution] is to students from different class backgrounds?; c) Do you feel like [name of institution] values working-class students?; and d) If I asked you if you feel like you belong at [name of institution], what would you say?"

(Bettencourt, 2021, p. 766)

A six-point criteria was used by the researcher to determine working-class students (Bettencourt, 2021).

The expectation of assimilation into campus life was determined to be the burden of working-class students (Bettencourt, 2021). Some working-class university students resisted and as a result, it was determined they lost access to social benefits, resources, and mobility (Bettencourt, 2021). Additionally, four themes emerged from the study: a) undetermined campus resources for belonging; b) low availability of spaces to promote

belonging; c) devalued working-class contributions to school life; and d) resisting belonging (Bettencourt, 2021).

As the understanding of belonging grows, acknowledgment of the relationship between belonging to student retention and academic achievement is a necessary aspect of future research. Additional studies to examine a sense of belonging across institutional types such as elite private institutions will benefit the field of belonging research.

### **Stakeholder and Organizational Data**

Research in higher education has shown that working-class students can feel stress and anxiety between the tension of how they feel about their home environments and their college communities (Bettencourt, 2020). Bettencourt furthered her investigations using narrative inquiry that centers on using storytelling data to explain the found tension in students' lived experiences (Bettencourt, 2021). Findings suggest that students from marginalized class backgrounds spent less time studying, interacting, and seeking the advice of faculty, and they completed fewer college courses than affluent peers (Bettencourt, 2021; Soria et al., 2013; Walpole, 2007).

While marginalized class backgrounds can be too broad, the term working-class students was established as students arrived at colleges with parent(s) or guardian(s) that did not have four-year degrees and four out of six of the following criteria: non-salaried jobs, jobs that did not require college degrees, jobs that did not require hiring or firing of co-workers, non-administrative jobs, jobs requiring manual labor, and jobs considered non-prestigious (Bettencourt, 2021; Hurst, 2010). Higher education has parallels to secondary education and studies have further established the parallel between working-class students and scholarship students (Bettencourt, 2021; Hurst, 2010). However, there

is a gap in research in secondary education regarding a sense of belonging. Thus, findings from this study show relevance to organizations like the International School Services, the National Association of Independent Schools, The Association of Boarding Schools, local institutions such as the Association of Independent Schools of New England, and well as private institutions (Bettencourt, 2021).

The benefits of further research into belonging among secondary independent schools will reach numerous groups. The challenge is that sense of belonging is inherently difficult to measure. Similar research data began with place attachment, or an experiential process created by the setting combined with what a person individually contributes over time to the other individuals in a designated space, such as a school or a workplace (Manzo, 2003). This meaning-making of a person's identity being connected to a shared sense of community was researched internationally to determine the connection between personal perception and community identity (Puddifoot, 2003). Further international research examined the dynamic role the sense of belonging plays between self and society, specifically that belonging is based on everyday habits (May, 2011). Research has identified belonging as a feeling of being "at home" (Antonsich, 2010). This would be beneficial to school communities where students live, such as colleges or secondary boarding schools.

School belonging has been researched with the understanding that a sense of belonging has a powerful effect on students' emotional, motivational, and academic prosperity, yet as of 2018, there were few attempts to listen to students' views on belonging outside of higher education (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). When research was conducted at the secondary level it was done so on managed moves in the UK school

systems (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). Managed moves are when students are transferred from one school to another because of school district needs rather than students' requests to transfer schools (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). Findings include different components of a sense of belonging for secondary students and the close relationship between a sense of belonging and a sense of safety or security, especially among fellow students (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). Craggs and Kelly (2018) also discussed the need for schools to create everyday routines to promote a sense of belonging and lessen the potential for anxiety by those who felt insecure. There remains a research gap in considering students' views on what makes schools conducive to a sense of belonging or non-belonging (Sime et al., 2021). Allen et al. (2021) conducted a review of the conceptual issues of belonging and put forth an integrated framework and directions for further research created by information by students, specifically secondary students.

A meta-analysis of 51 other studies of secondary students was created to share what schools need to know about fostering belonging, and findings revealed ten themes that influence belonging for secondary students: academic motivation, emotional stability, personal characteristics, parent support, peer support, teacher support, gender, race and ethnicity, extracurricular activities, and environmental safety (Allen et al., 2018). Of these 10 themes, positive personal characteristics and teacher support were found to be the leading predictors of belonging. However, it was not determined if belonging was different for different socio-economic classes of students. The Allen et al. (2018) meta-study included renowned educational researchers such as Lea Waters and John Hattie. Waters and Hattie found it would be beneficial for future researchers to study the extent to which economic and other socio-ecological factors

interact with students to develop a sense of belonging (as cited in Allen et al., 2018).

Qualitative studies have been established to explore schools as places for students becoming themselves and belonging to the elementary school setting (Sime et al., 2021). While elementary schools can be places of inclusion and connectedness, they can also be environments of misrecognition and disengagement (Sime et al., 2021). Sime et al. (2021) asked students to reflect on their primary school experience. Data from the study show the power of inequalities in elementary children's home lives can create difficulties in assimilating to a new environment with different norms and values. Sime et al. further stated the role adults can play to mitigate and reduce perceptions of such inequalities. However, adults need to be able to determine which students are feeling a sense of belonging and which are not while the students are in school.

Bettencourt (2021) studied two different higher educational institutions and determined the more adversity students felt created a higher sense of resilience (Bettencourt, 2021). By using a narrative inquiry research method design that centered on students' lived experience, the research provided a greater understanding of belonging in a school relationship. Bettencourt added clarity and consistent language for understanding working-class students' sense of belonging involving school-based experiences, relationships with peers and teachers, and emotional connection to their school (as cited in Allen et al., 2021; Bettencourt, 2021). However, Bettencourt's study was focused on higher education, not secondary schools. The Allen et al. (2021) integrated framework and Bettencourt's research questions and methodology need to be applied to secondary school experiences to determine issues of equity and access,

especially between two groups of students, those on scholarship and those not on scholarship to determine the similarities and differences in sense of belonging.

### **Summary**

Belonging is an essential psychological need that stems from an individual's desire to be accepted by a group. Belonging means an established sense of familiarity, security, comfort, established relationships, and emotional attachment (Antonsich, 2009). Attachment or belonging can be equated to personal relationships; however, a similar feeling of attachment can be felt by a person about a place, and such a feeling is called place attachment. Place attachment or sense of togetherness is a focus of belonging research (Fisher & Sonn, 1999; Morley, 2001; Manzo, 2003; 2005).

Significant research on belonging has been done on adolescents, especially in a school setting (Jury et al., 2019; Soria et al., 2013; Soria & Bultman, 2014; Yeager et al., 2018).

This study aims to identify and compare students' sense of belonging by examining the stories of two groups of students' lived experience. The two groups are scholarship and non-scholarship students at independent secondary schools. The study will be a narrative inquiry design that centers on students' lived experience. The students' stories will serve as data to determine their sense of belonging using the Allen et al. (2021) integrated framework. Students aged 18 to 21 will be used in the study to allow study participants to reflect on their secondary school experience. The benefit of time, distance, and in many cases a comparative educational experience (college or university) enhances the research (Crabbe et al., 2019; Hudley et al., 2009).

Allen et al. (2021)'s framework is used to understand the students' sense of belonging in the stories. The framework helped this researcher to have a method to code the student stories into themes. Allen et al. (2021) posited that competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions are central elements that can be used to better understand the sense of belonging an individual has to an environment, in this case, an independent secondary school environment.

### **Chapter Three: Methods and Design for Action**

The purpose of this study was to determine the sense of belonging of two groups of students, low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students, by examining stories of their lived experience. Private schools have an opportunity to decrease the equity gap by offering admission to low-income students who would not be able to attend without scholarship funding. However, results indicate that low-income higher education students who only attended a private school because a scholarship was available experienced a lower sense of belonging compared to non-scholarship college students (Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2013).

This researcher's study was based on previous research in higher education that examined students' struggles to belong, which are particularly reported by minorities and other historically marginalized groups (Allen, 2021). These struggles have also demonstrated some positive aspects. There are recent studies in higher education showing the greater the adversity, the more students developed a sense of resilience (Bettencourt, 2021). However, there lacks significant research on how minority status affects secondary students' sense of belonging (Vaz et al., 2015). There is a gap in research on how students' sense of belonging is different for low-income scholarship students versus

non-scholarship students. In this study personal stories of students' lived experience could reveal assets and barriers that impacted equity and access for students at a secondary private school level.

### **Central Research Questions**

- 1) How the sense of belonging formed in a secondary school setting compare two groups of students: scholarship and non-scholarship?
- 2) How/where was belonging formed in the following interrelated areas: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions? (Allen et al., 2021).
  - a. Competencies: Students had a set of skills and abilities needed to connect and experience belonging.
  - b. Opportunities: Students had the ability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur.
  - c. Motivations: Students needed or desired to connect with others.
  - d. Perceptions: Students had subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experience.

### **Study Purpose and Design**

This study compared the sense of belonging between two groups of students, low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students. There is a gap in research on how students perceive a sense of belonging, specifically at secondary independent schools (Allen et al., 2021; Bettencourt, 2021; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Jury et al., 2019; Leibowitz et al., 2019; Sime et al., 2021; Vaz et al., 2015;). This study examined how students' sense of belonging differed between scholarship students and non-scholarship students.

The goal of this study was to gain insight into differences in equity and access to an independent secondary school experience. Recognizing admission and enrollment in an independent school does not guarantee a feeling of belonging is central to this study. Love and belonging are basic human needs (Maslow, 1943). In an increasingly complex world, people search for safety in a community (Morley, 2001). Schools are communities for students where they can feel a sense of belonging, love, and safety.

However, a sense of belonging to a place is different for different people because emotional connection differs between genders, class, race and ethnicity, sexuality, stages of life, ability, affluence, or power in society (Arcidiacono et al., 2007; Fenster, 2004; Manzo, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2006). To understand different individuals' sense of belonging, this study examined students' narratives of their lived experience.

By examining personal stories using an integrated framework to define and measure belonging (Allen et al., 2021), this researcher had a mechanism to code the student stories into themes. The framework posits that competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions are central elements in strategies that can be used to better understand the sense of belonging an individual has to an environment, in this case, an independent secondary school environment.

Participants' personal stories of lived experience can reveal assets and barriers that impact equity and access for all individuals at a secondary private school level. This researcher gathered data about social, cultural, environmental, and temporal contexts and experiences as they are fluid and integrated into a school setting (Allen et al., 2021). The stories students told were used as data for the research. This study used an interview protocol including but not limited to basic information about the interview, opening

questions, content questions, open-ended prompts, and closing instructions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

There were two sets of data gathered, the first was a survey to ascertain and confirm scholarship or non-scholarship status and to determine attendance at the cooperating independent school. The second set of data was an interview. To gain a robust understanding of the participants' sense of belonging, open-ended questions were asked during the interview from each of the elements encompassed with the integrated framework: competencies, perceptions, motivations, and opportunities (Allen et al., 2021). Specific questions asked in research interviews appear in Appendix A.

## **Participants and Data Sources**

### ***Stakeholder and Participant***

The target population for this research was individuals who have recently matriculated from secondary independent schools. Participants ages 18 to 21 can have a retrospective account of their lived experiences in high school and offer insight into high school experiences (Crabbe et al., 2019). By focusing on a composition of recent independent high school graduates, this researcher's study focuses an in-group lens on the experiences of belonging. Links between high school and higher education are needed especially in economically and ethnically diverse samples (Hudley et al., 2009). Results from this study will help to inform secondary independent schools specifically about how they can best welcome and incorporate students of different socio-economic levels into their community.

### ***Demographics***

This study used maximum variation sampling (Fowler, 2014; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2019) to yield the widest range of participants and the truest representation of students. This purposeful sampling was guided by the criteria of students' age and matriculation from the same independent secondary school. The criterion sample was from various higher education institutions. All participants were selected due to being in one of two categories, low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students.

This sample target also included a range of diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, and race while maintaining a homogeneous population of ages between 18 and 21. The participant pool was offered by the case study school's alumni relations office. The school sent out a voluntary offer to participate in the study. Individuals who could be interviewed remotely were given priority in participation. No other exclusions were made.

Of the participants interviewed 15 were female, 11 were male, one was Hispanic, one was Black or African American, and 24 were White. All were between the ages of 18 and 21. 25 participants lived in the United States and 1 lived outside the United States. All participants were non-paid volunteers. All students must have attended the case study independent secondary school that is tuition-dependent (Shewey, 2019).

### ***Confidentiality and Record Keeping***

As part of the consent, all participants were guaranteed confidentiality. As stated, participants were non-paid volunteers. To ascertain scholarship and non-scholarship, potential students in the study completed a screening survey. Hurst's (2010) criteria was used for scholarship students: those who received more than 50% tuition assistance. Non-

scholarship students were defined as paying full tuition. The status of the 26 scholarship and non-scholarship students was verified by the [School's] registrar and Chief Business Officer.

Of the students invited to participate in interviews, 28 completed the first survey with 26 returning for a second interview. On average, interviews lasted 30 minutes each and occurred two weeks apart. Participants were assured they could quit participation in the study at any point.

Interviews were recorded via Zoom conferencing software. The account was password secured and private. All recordings were stored on a double-backed-up Google Drive. In the event interviews were not conducted in person, Apple sound technology was used to record the interview, and then the recording was stored on a secure Google drive before transcription.

### ***Generalizability***

Active listening was used to gather findings, perceptions, and details from participants (Seidman, 2019). All interviews were transcribed, assigned pseudonyms, and de-identified. During the transcription process, individual memos were generated for each participant to engage in a critical reflection process and establish preliminary analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These memos were necessary when performing a pilot interview test with mock participants.

Participants represent a sample of the independent, secondary school population (Hudley et al., 2009). Prior to data collection, the researcher met with staff on campus, Head of School, Director of Admission, Director of Advancement, and Chief Business Officer, to gain intuitional context for a better understanding of the specifics of the

student interviews. This was beneficial for data analysis and established a common reference of the lived experience. The researcher shared the study's abstract and his contact information with administrators in case a student participant reached out to them and needed to follow up with the researcher.

During the interview, the researcher used a strategy of member-checking. Member-checking is an integral part of creating trustworthiness in qualitative research (Candela, 2019). As conversational interactions with participants are potentially nuanced and varied, narrative inquiry requires flexibility (Bettencourt, 2021). However, by using participants with multiple stories from the same institutions, the researcher could triangulate data sources and increase the internal validity of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### ***Data Collection and Specific Practices***

**Rationale.** A narrative inquiry was used to learn participants' stories and lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Belonging is a dynamic feeling so multiple interview questions were used to capture the complex feelings of belonging that can shift over time (Seidman, 2019). Narrative inquiry interviews helped students share a lived story, tell it, retell it, and in many cases relive the stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In narrative inquiry, participants share and relive their stories of belonging in conversations with the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The use of narrative allowed participants to contextualize individual experiences from a community setting (Bettencourt, 2021). Specific open-ended questions were constructed for the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A). These questions were reviewed and approved by the Plymouth State University Institutional Review Board. During the narrative inquiry

process, the researcher paraphrased the participants' answers to check for understanding of the question. All clarifications and considerations were explored in depth (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Seidman, 2019).

### **Data Analysis and Evaluation**

Data collection was done over Zoom in a natural setting chosen by the participant. The iterative and up-close information was gathered by paraphrasing participants' stories, observing behavior, and asking open-ended research questions (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The researcher used Creswell and Creswell's (2018) data analysis workflow (see Appendix B) to validate the accuracy of the information. The narrative interviews were transcribed verbatim, field notes were typed and referenced against the researcher's memos of each participant, and the notes were member checked. Before generating a description and themes, all codes were formed using Tesch's eight-step (see Appendix C) approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The researcher used Tesch's eight-step coding and inter-coding reliability (IRC) to add credibility to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Seidman, 2019). Data collection and text analysis were done simultaneously, specifically, interviews with different participants, and write-ups were performed concurrently with coding and theme generation (Seidman, 2019). The researcher used a qualitative codebook that contained a list of predetermined codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This provided definitions for codes to maximize consistency since interviews happened over a span of time.

The researcher reached saturation when parent codes and categories were repeated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Before organizing the final categories and alphabetizing the codes, this researcher reexamined the data to determine if recoding the data was

necessary due to redundancy or overlap (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Finally, all codes were grouped into themes that represent a central idea (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A narrative was written for each theme.

### **Targets and Timelines**

The researcher recruited participants in the summer of 2022 and scheduled interviews using Calendly Software to provide a variety of interview appointment options. Interviews were conducted in June, July, and August. All recordings were done on Zoom software or Apple Sound software. Observations, field notes, and narratives were transcribed immediately (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants reviewed the transcripts for inter-coder reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Seidman, 2019).

Interviews and any follow-up questions were conducted by September 2022. The final analysis was conducted in the fall of 2022. Member-checking of the results was conducted before discerning findings and reporting on the findings of the study. The research and findings will be shared with two affinity groups, the Association of Independent Schools of New England (AISNE) and the for-profit company Enrollment Management Association. A formal publication will be submitted to private school professional organizations, the National Association of Independent Schools and The Association of Boarding Schools.

### **Limitations**

The genesis of this study was a gap in research between higher education studies and secondary independent school research on belonging. More research is needed to be done on students' sense of belonging at the secondary level, specifically in the private school setting. This researcher was the primary data-collecting instrument. Therefore,

personal values, assumptions, and biases existed at the outset of the study. This researcher's perception of secondary private school education was shaped by time as an administrator, instructor, coach, dormitory parent, and advisor to ninth to twelfth-grade students at an elite New England Boarding School with a 200-year history. This researcher recognized that personal biases may exist (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although every effort was made to ensure objectivity, these biases may have shaped the way this researcher viewed and understood the data collected. Triangulation of the data was paramount to decreasing this bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Another limitation was the small sample size and case study approach. Using the case study research method limited the potential for generalization of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, the chosen secondary independent school [The School] is a representative sample school of the 129 other independent schools in New England (NAIS, 2021). Likewise, the 26 participants are a representative population of students from different ethnic, racial, and gender backgrounds. All ethical considerations were considered to secure willing volunteers of adult age (Seidman, 2019). This study was correlated against other similar studies of this age range (Bettencourt, 2020; Crabbe et al., 2019; Hudley et al., 2009).

### **Summary**

This qualitative case study used the narrative inquiry model (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which allowed for the lived experience stories of the participants to be shared. The seminal work of Allen et al. (2019) and Bettencourt (2021) influenced, inspired, and guided the need to fill the gap in research on the sense of belonging in all areas of education. Creswell and Creswell's (2018) data analysis workflow, Tesch's eight-

step coding, and IRC was used to increase the validity of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Seidman, 2019). Additionally, the researcher's role in the interview processes allowed for a contextual understanding of participants' stories, which in turn allowed for greater generalization. Another key factor in the reliability of the study was the use of recently graduated independent school students in their post-secondary educational institutions. The benefits of time and distance on reflection are well documented (Crabbe et al., 2019; Hudley et al., 2009).

Findings from this study may allow a sense of belonging to be determined and fostered across other institutional types such as elementary and public institutions. Future research could provide an understanding of how two different groups, scholarship, and non-scholarship students, gain emotional access and experience belonging in a more equitable manner. Still, more research should be done to replicate this study at other secondary independent schools.

## **Chapter 4: Description of Findings and Recommended Actions**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine the sense of belonging between two groups of students, low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students, by examining stories of their lived experience. This researcher's study was based on previous research in higher education that examined students' struggles to belong, which are particularly reported by minorities and other historically marginalized groups (Allen, 2021). This study aims to have personal stories of students' lived experience reveal assets and barriers that impacted equity and access for students at a secondary independent school level. Specific research questions posed are as follows:

**Central Research Questions**

- 1) How did a sense of belonging form in a secondary school setting compare two groups of students: scholarship and non-scholarship?
- 2) How/where was belonging formed in the following interrelated areas: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions? (Allen et al., 2021).
  - a. Competencies: Students had a set of skills and abilities needed to connect and experience belonging.
  - b. Opportunities: Students had the ability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur.
  - c. Motivations: Students needed or desired to connect with others.
  - d. Perceptions: Students had subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experience.

The narrative inquiry process allowed the researcher to learn participants' stories and lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The interview tool was eight open-ended questions on four integrated conceptual issues (Allen, 2021). Belonging is a dynamic feeling so a multiple interview question series was used to capture the complex feelings of belonging that can shift over time (Seidman, 2019). Study participants, ages 18-21, reflected on their experiences in secondary independent school to share a lived story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The use of narrative allowed participants to contextualize individual experiences from a community setting (Bettencourt, 2021).

A pilot interview process was conducted using student volunteers that did not meet the criteria of the study. Four students provided feedback on question clarity and

question order. The order of the questions was changed because of the pilot interview process.

Member-checking was part of the process throughout the study. During interviews, the researcher would paraphrase responses back to participants to check the meaning of their statements and to check for understanding. This verified that the researcher understood the significance of their message (Seidman, 2019). The researcher sent all coded transcripts to the participants for final verification (Seidman, 2019).

The findings that emerged from this study are organized into four overarching themes. Each theme is broken down into separate sections. These sections are based on identified themes from Allen et al. (2021) belonging framework: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions. Lastly, the findings of a sense of belonging are addressed. Each theme and its sections are thoroughly discussed in the following chapter.

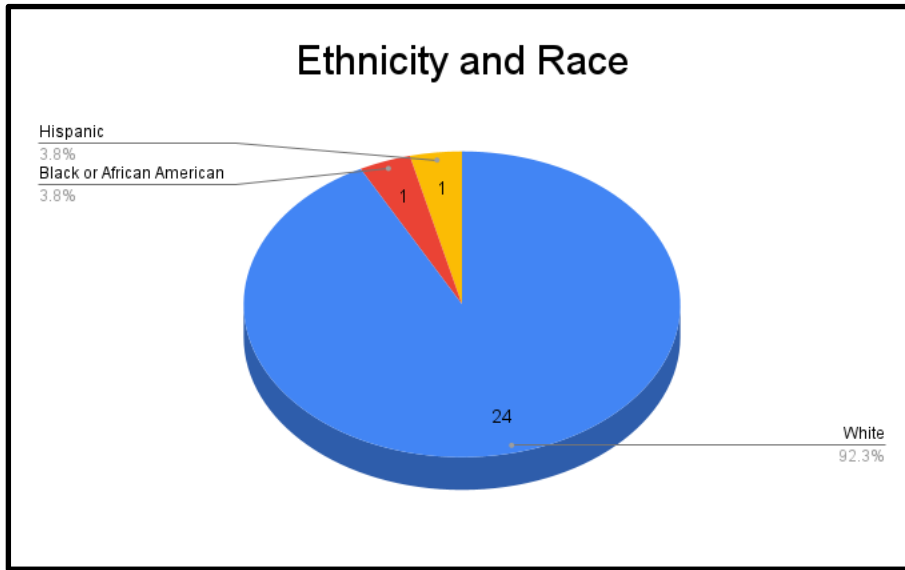
## **Discussion of Findings**

### ***Participants***

There were 26 participants interviewed for this study. Figure 2 displays data based on ethnicity and race: 92% White, 4% Black, and 4% Hispanic. Figure 3 shows participant data based on gender: 57.7% and 42.3% male. Figure 4 illustrates a breakdown of age ranges. The participant sample was 14% age 18, 22.2% age 19, 31.1% age 20, and 32.7% age 21. Most participants were in college and therefore in areas across the United States, with one participant in Florence, Italy. Figure 5 shows the breakdown: seven participants from New Hampshire, five participants from Maine, five from Massachusetts, eight from other states, and one participant from Florence, Italy.

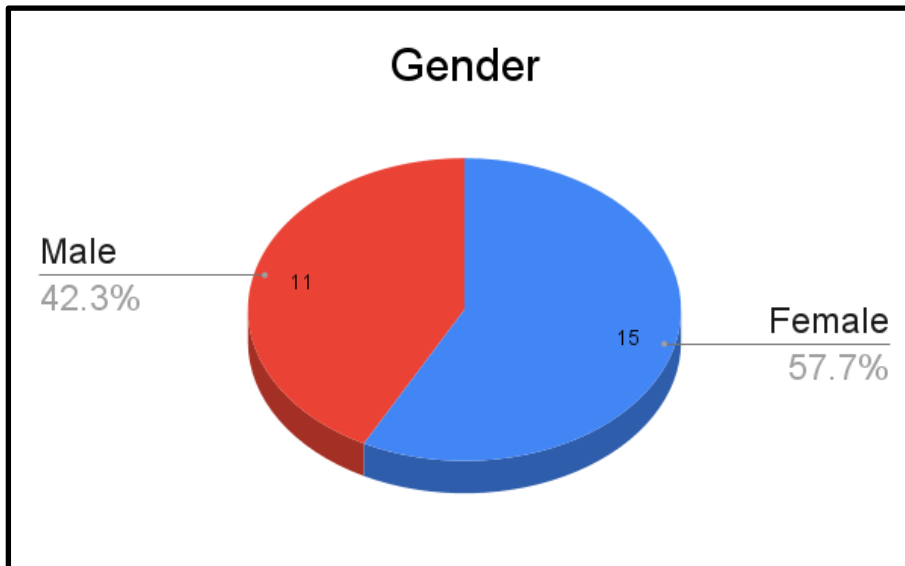
**Figure 4.1**

*Participant Demographics Based on Ethnicity and Race*



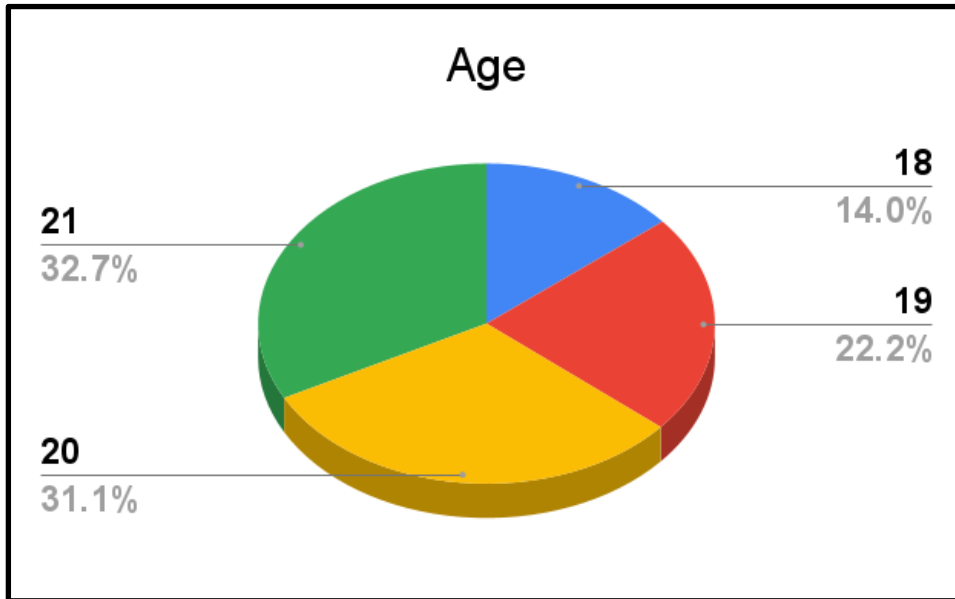
**Figure 4.2**

*Participant Demographics Based on Gender*



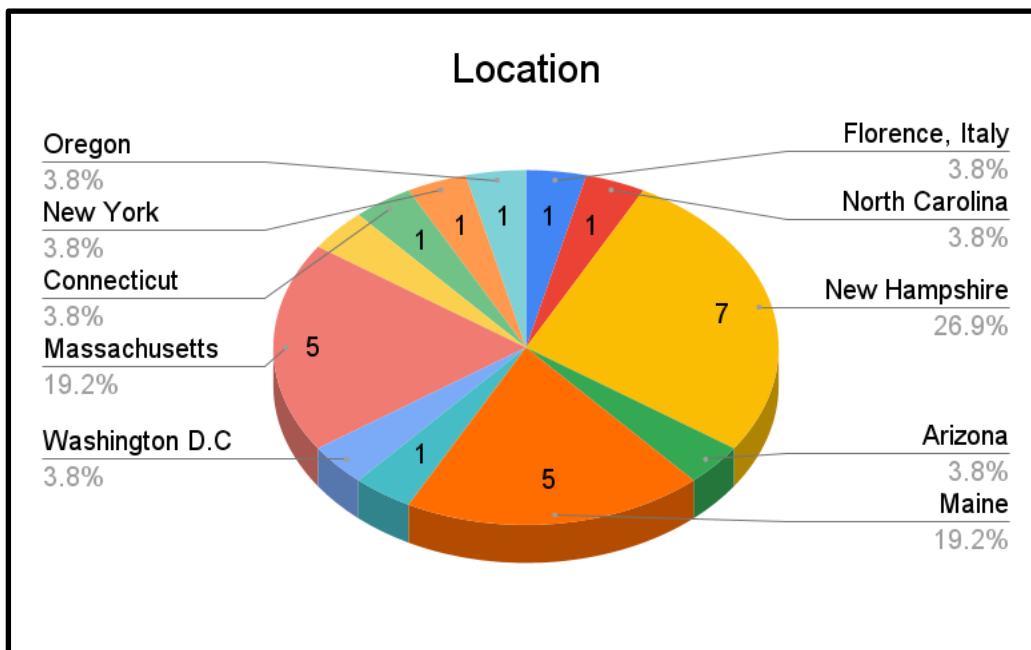
**Figure 4.3**

*Participant Demographics Based on Age*



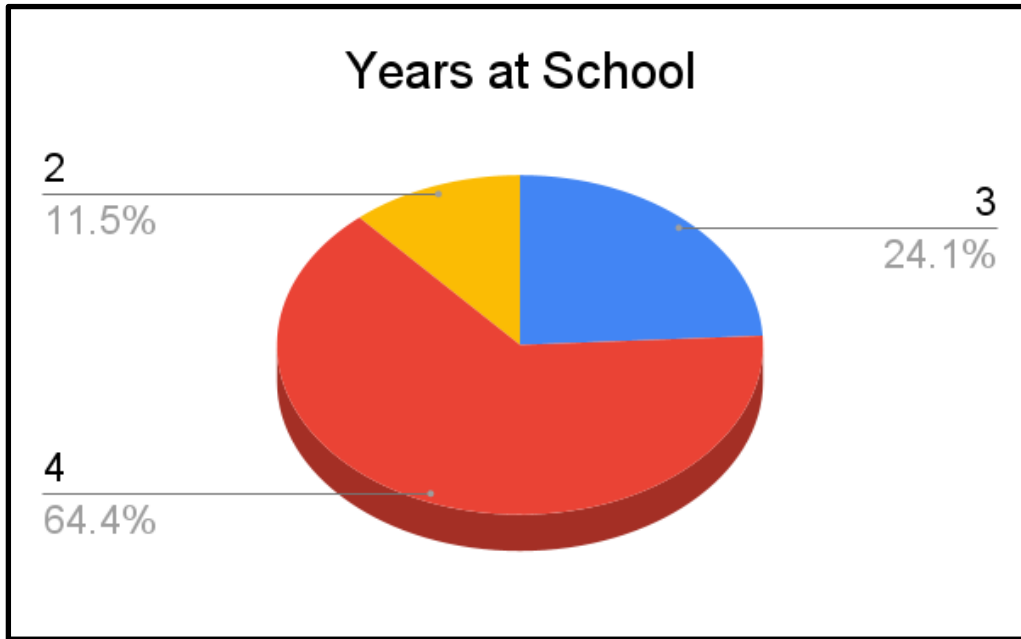
**Figure 4.4**

*Participant Demographics Based on Location*



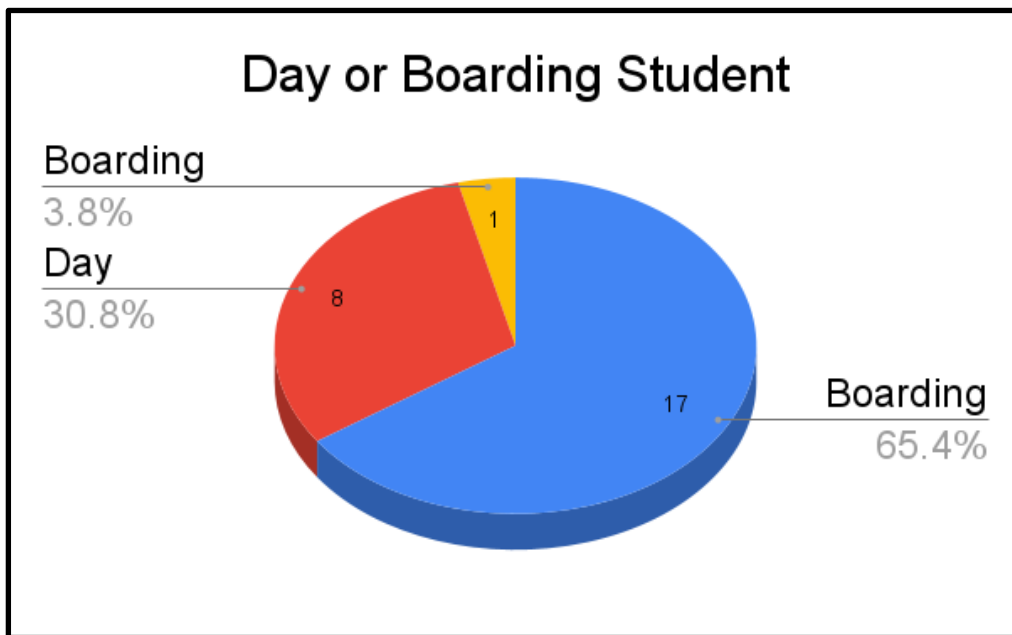
**Figure 4.5**

*Years at Participating School*



**Figure 4.6**

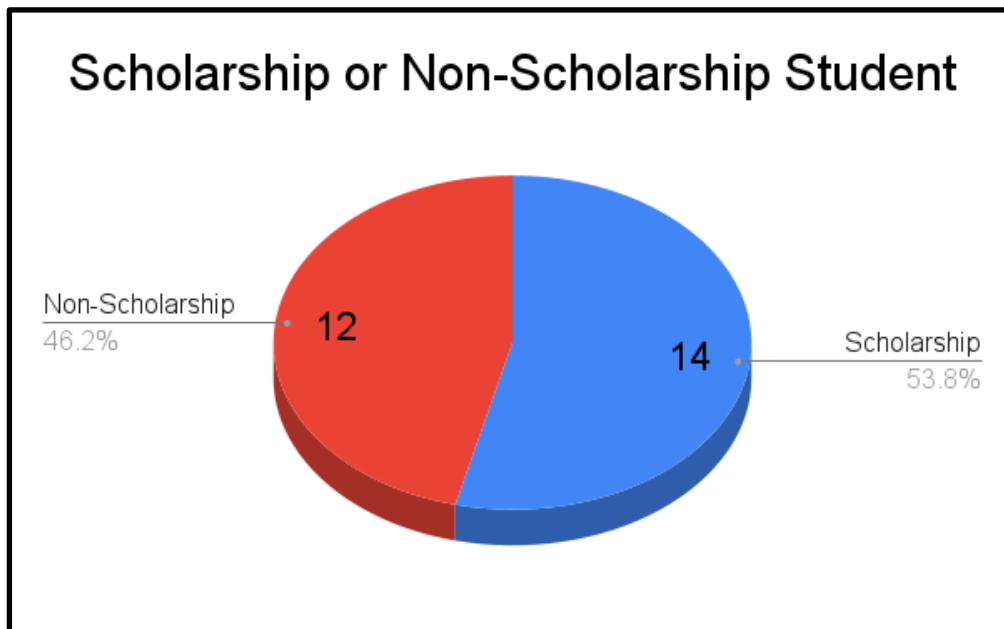
*Day or Boarding Student During Secondary School*



Important to this study on independent secondary schools are the years in attendance and whether the participants were boarding students or day students. Figure 6 shows the data in years in attendance: 11.5% attended for two years, 24.1% attended for three years, and 64.4% attended for four years. Figure 7 illustrates the number of day students 30.8 % (8), boarding students 65.4% (17), and one day or boarding student, depending on the year 3.8% (1). Figures 6 and 7 show demographic findings that have significant relevance to the themes of this study. Specifically, more time, both in location and years of attendance, increased the number of examples of belonging experienced by the participants.

**Figure 4.7**

*Scholarship or Non-Scholarship Student*



Lastly, Figure 8 illustrates the number of full pay students (12) and scholarship students (14). The participating school provided 324 names and email addresses of the matriculated classes of 2020, 2021, and 2022. These are the total number of alumni with

available contact information. The survey to participate in the study was sent to 156 students that met the criteria of being non-scholarship or receiving 50% or more financial-aid money. The scholarship or non-scholarship status was provided by the cooperating institution. The scholarship status was also confirmed by participants in the consent process.

Over more than a three-month process, 28 students consented to be interviewed. Two students could not be interviewed because when cross-referenced with the school-provided financial aid data, the students had not received 50% or more financial aid. The remaining 26 students were interviewed, and all interviews were coded.

The 26 interviews occurred from July 2022 through September 2022 utilizing the online synchronous Zoom platform. Each interview was approximately 30 minutes long. Interviews were conducted at convenient times for each participant. Participants consented to both audio and video recordings. These recordings were saved in a secure Google Drive. The Zoom transcription was utilized; however, due to many inaccuracies, all interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. All participants' names were redacted and replaced with numeric codes. The transcription allowed for a deeper understanding of the narratives as well as analysis for future coding (Seidman, 2019).

The researcher utilized various methods for member-checking. Throughout each interview, the researcher would not interrupt the speaker except to ask for clarification, to allow for the greatest amount of authenticity in each answer (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Participants shared in real-time and the researcher was able to paraphrase statements to check for understanding. At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher sent all coded transcripts to the participants with quotes that would be potentially utilized

in the results. Pause words such as "like" or "um" were omitted from many of the quotes to aid in readability. Participants were asked to verify their answers (Seidman, 2019). All participants were instructed this way “Any inconsistencies, please let me know immediately.” The researcher did not receive any unfavorable responses.

The following five integrated themes and corresponding subthemes were identified from an in-depth analysis of the transcribed interviews using inductive and deductive reasoning after multiple readings:

1. Competencies
  - a. Open-minded
  - b. Willing to be vulnerable
  - c. Self-Assured
2. Opportunities
  - a. Subtheme: School program
  - b. Subtheme: Participant groups
3. Motivations
  - a. Self-Motivation
  - b. Encouraged by others
4. Perceptions
  - a. Community
  - b. Familiar
  - c. Inclusive
5. Belonging
  - a. Subtheme: Fit
    - i. Supported
    - ii. Access

### **Competencies**

Competencies to belong were confirmed throughout the interview process. Participants cited positive examples of feeling able and skilled to belong on an independent school campus. These findings were consistent with both groups, scholarship and non-scholarship students. The findings in this study are aligned with the stated framework in Allen et al. (2021).

***Open-Minded***

Many participants stated that when starting at an independent school it was important to begin with an open mind for the experiences before them. Eighteen students of students interviewed (boarding students) reported this was the first time they were living away from home. As an example, one student stated, “What helps you to kind of feel like you belong to the school, I think was the ability to go in with an open mindset.” Another participant stated, “I think just being open-minded is huge, just because at a boarding school where 80% of the kids are borders and 30% of them are international...if you are not open and really personal to people you won’t thrive as much.” The understanding and proactive acknowledgment of new people in one’s life and recognition that there will be alternative perspectives were repeated statements in the case study.

***Willingness to Be Vulnerable***

The second most mentioned quality was the ability to be vulnerable. It was described in different ways. Participants described vulnerability as “outgoingness,” and a willingness to “try new things and kind of do something different.” Another participant stated that “being outgoing in a boarding school environment definitely helps you meet people...feeling accepted feeling like you could be vulnerable.” A third participant stated they had to develop the mindset to be vulnerable and abandoned the need to be perfect. This participant went on to describe how their advisor helped them reframe their mindset to feel accepted at school:

He was saying that it’s okay to make mistakes. You don’t need to get all A’s to be a good student, to be accepted in this community. It’s more important that you

make those mistakes so you can grow as a person and move forward rather than stay stuck in this ideal of what's not realistic.

The desire to change and be vulnerable was a competency the participant developed. The competency strategy was stated throughout many participant interviews.

### *Self-Assured*

Participants shared characteristics of confidence that they belonged. Participants used the terms "extroverted," "personable," and "friendly" to describe their competencies to belong. The interviewed participants reflected on their 14–16-year-old selves when using the words to describe their skills in feeling accepted, respected, included, and welcomed in the independent school environment. One participant stated, "I had an understanding of who I was outside of home." This same participant said they felt "socially aware" of their surroundings enough to "just sit down with random people at lunch nearly every day, just like get to know them...I just really put myself out there." The participant went on to say those relationships continued. The immediate self-confidence and self-initiated relationship building was not expressed by all participants. More students explained the benefit of designed opportunities for belonging, as stated in the next set of response themes.

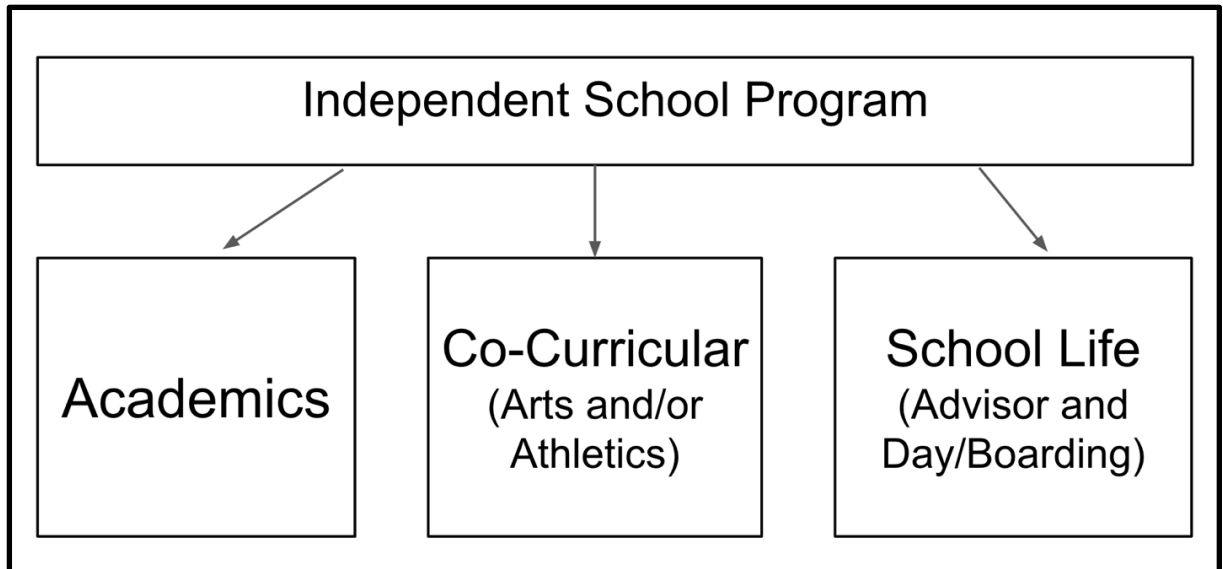
### **Opportunities**

All participants (n=26) participants identified an aspect of the independent school program as providing an opportunity to belong. See figure 9 for the trifecta of the independent school programmatic model. Independent school students are students, co-curricular participants, and members of school life in advisory and residential life. The least self-described term is advisory. Students explained an advisory is a meeting of five

to seven other students with a faculty member assigned to be the advisor. An advisor was described as “your parent on campus, you go to them with academic questions, transportation questions, or any advice. They also take you to the hospital if you need it.”

**Figure 4.8**

*Independent Student Program*



As one participant described, "there are so many different opportunities to find your group of people." The availability of people, places, times, and spaces the participants stated is consistent with the research presented by Allen et al. (2021). The skill or strategies are useless if opportunities are lacking for the student. The finding of this researcher determined, the opportunities to experience a sense of belonging are not lacking at the cooperating independent school.

*Academics*

All participants were high school students. Being students is the only aspect of the independent school experience that was common to all participants. However, many

participants had experience in a program within the school known as the International Baccalaureate Program. A specific participant stated:

I found a lot of peers through the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program.”

While this was a specific statement, it was echoed by other participants. Another participant stated “IB, specifically full IB has theory of knowledge (class), which is this one class where you can only take it if you’re full IB and it is the best class because we were all stressed out...and we were able to just work it out together and communicate. This is what students need to succeed and so that class had such a strong group that was together.

The opportunity to be in a supported, selected group created a sense of belonging for the student.

### *Co-Curriculars*

The opportunity to be in a co-curricular program was almost universally recognized as a benefit. One participant's response was a statistical outlier as the participant stated, "not being part of the required co-curricular...made a huge impact" on his last year at the school. The impact the student was describing was a positive impact of not being required to do co-curriculars. This was a singular finding. This was the only stated example of non-belonging associated with co-curriculars from the participants interviewed.

Many participants found belonging in sports activities. One participant said, "Sports is a big one for me. I think that sports give me a sense of belonging, allow me to make friends and connections, interactions with other people which strengthens my sense of belonging in school." Specifically, participants mentioned that time with other athletes

made it easier to belong. As one participant stated, "I definitely think being an athlete was much easier to adjust, and because of having a fall sport when I first got there, it was much easier to meet people and just feel more included." Along these same ideas of peer opportunities and the opportunity to spend time together to play a common sport, pre-season sports were a reoccurring idea as exemplified by the statement below:

I played on the football team so we had a preseason, and it was the days and the practices there that I met older kids, and they kind of accepted me, and I became really close with the football team. But I feel like if I didn't play football and I just came like that first day of classes...then I wouldn't have had friends and it would have been harder for me to make friends...that participation in football translated to having peers when school started just days later.

The statement is consistent with research by Allen et al. (2021) that opportunities to interact with others provide mutual benefits to all parties involved. The converse of this sentiment was also expressed by participants: students interviewed did not report being jealous or envious of other participants on teams because "everyone's coming together and just like hanging out for an hour or two, obviously pushing each other but it's also fun where you get to know people...people outside the classroom, which I think is very beneficial."

Other participants stated they were more inclined to feel included and accepted in the arts. As one participant explained, "The whole theater experience. I was very involved in that. I found a real community in theater, and it was very interesting to see people who typically weren't in theater were so welcomed to join for one show...and everyone just became friends." In the context of this study, this participant also

participated in a team sport. However, many participants mentioned their overlapping interests in multiple programmatic opportunities. One participant stated, "I was part of the hockey team so that helped me feel like I belong, but I played soccer, kind of dabbled in lacrosse...also I was part of the IB program." This level of inclusive belonging in multiple programmatic areas was commonly reported among participants.

### *School Life*

Advisory was a part of the school life program described by the participants. The references to advisory were expressed positively, almost endearingly. Nearly 30% of the participants interviewed stated it was the number one most notable part of their sense of belonging. As one participant stated,

the advising group program was very helpful ... my advisor was Mrs. W and she played a lot of games with us, we had discussions, and it was very open to talk about whatever because she said that, she had a policy that anything you say while we're in an advisory group unless it is actually dangerous, it was confidential."

Other participants stated, "I always felt like I had a kind of a family away from my actual family.

Study participants reiterated aspects of trust among advisory groups. One participant stated, "you get to be close with your advisor group." These small group communities increased a sense of belonging and elevated the potential feelings of isolation. One participant shared that their advisor let him walk her dog and that helped him feel included. Many participants fondly explained stories of going to their advisor's house for

dinner as an opportunity for belonging. One participant said, “We would go to dinners at his house and sit there for hours and talk.”

Nearly 70% of the students interviewed were boarding students. While 30% of the students still reported a positive sense of belonging, there were reports of non-belonging by day students. One participant stated, "I wish I was boarding because obviously there's so much other stuff that happens when I'm at home...sometimes I would stay. They let me stay in their rooms and so they made you feel welcome to room with a student." There were opportunities for day students to participate in residential life.

Consistent with other research, there are numerous ways for people to belong but having fewer options can motivate a person to belong (Allen et al., 2021; Bettencourt, 2021). One participant shared,

Being a border definitely kind of pushes you so you don't really have like that security per se, just being home. I think it kind of what just pushed me to interact with other people is that I wanted to make a positive impact on people.

Being able to have the opportunity to challenge themselves brings a sense of belonging to the participant and to others in the same situation.

#### ***Additional Groups: Husky Ambassador Program and Honor Board***

Two groups that did not categorize into the above areas are worthy to mention. Participants stated that "giving school tours (Husky Ambassador Program) was a big part (of belonging) for me ... having that program be available to help with students (find) a new group of friends that you may not have known before." Three out of the 26 students shared sentiments similar to "(Husky Ambassador Program) is good to be able to share what my experiences are, but also learn how my experiences could benefit others coming

to [The School]." One student stated that the program "builds your public speaking skills and your comfortability...I've really loved and kind of found a new spot for myself there." Fortunately, these participants were able to join the Husky Ambassador Program as this is an invitation-only program by the Admission Office at the participating school.

The student Honor Board was also a program that was mentioned by three of the 26 participants. As one participant explained, "The Honor Board was for issues in disciplinary matters." Two of the three participants stated negative feelings of belonging. As one student stated, "the Honor Board is one of those things that I was a pretty front-row-seat about ... I think it could have been handled a bit differently." Another student commented,

I was on the Honor Board; the Honor Board recommends to the administration what to do ... there were a couple of times when there was like full ride, financial aid students, and suspension was recommended, and they were expelled.

The Honor Board was a repeated example of non-belonging from four of the 26 study participants.

## **Motivations**

### ***Self-Motivated***

The need to belong is important for all ages (Allen et al., 2018; Craggs & Kelly, 2018). The feeling of being included, connected, and experiencing positive, long-term human relationships is paramount to one's life (Jury et al., 2019; Leibowitz et al., 2019). Belonging may be particularly relevant to the unique and specific needs and challenges of adolescents (ages 12-18) (Allen et al., 2018). While participants believed they had

opportunities and skills to be able to feel like they belonged, their motivations, needs, and desires to connect were the most pronounced in their interviews.

Eight of the 26 participants stated their primary motivation to belong at The School was themselves. Three of the participants were scholarship and five of those participants were non-scholarship students. While one student said it was “intrinsic” to want to “fit into the community,” others stated more explicitly what their motivation to belong was, “I just like people liking me.” The participant went on to say, “not that I care too much but I prefer people like me.”

One participant stated their self-motivation for belonging was about friends and grades:

I like interactions with people, and that drove me to want to make new friends” ...

“I wanted to increase my chances of playing sports in college...I know I need good grades for that, so it motivated me. I could buy into the whole process.

Another participant shared that “I always had a really, really strong desire to be included, to find friends at the school.” A second participant also expressed a strong desire to be a “people pleaser and be open to getting to know others” and felt a reciprocal feeling of “being uplifted by the people around me.” These senses of satisfaction and inclusion stated by the participants are consistent with the research on motivation and belonging (Allen et al., 2021).

**Personal Drive.** This expression was stated by one participant as:

my drive (to belong) was ...people are showing up to your games...everyone is supporting you there" and "I wanted to take my skills to the next level...I want to play division one Lacrosse, so that was my next-level drive.

The participant had interrelated motivations, intrinsic motivation, and feeling supported by others.

**Self and Others.** Another stated motivation was the desire to be a leader in helping others belong:

What really made me want to feel included...was looking at the relationships of the upperclassmen when I first came in. My freshman year is a whole new group of kids and none of us knew each other...you're scrambling around to make friends and what really was for me, what made me want to strive to make this connection...was looking at the people ahead of me who had made those connections, and they were like an integral part of this campus, and I was like wow! I want to work hard to become those people, and to be that person on campus that people go to for help and for friendship and kindness.

This sentiment was echoed by another participant: "I was put in like a situation where I was kind of observing all these role models that were doing what I wanted to be doing in the next like four years." The participant went on to state:

So, like I knew before I went there that I was like very determined, but when I got there it made me like even more ambitious and determined, just seeing all these people achieve like because they were committed and accepted.

Older students being a factor in belonging was a repeated concept in the findings from this study.

### ***Encouraged by Others***

While many indicated self-motivation, others stated, "people at the School always helped me find my drive." The same participant went on to share, "my drive was from

other people, and how they made me feel.” This feeling of wanting to be accepted, respected, included, and supported by others is consistent with the integrated framework of belonging posited by Allen et al. (2021).

**Family Members.** Four participants stated family members were their motivation for belonging. One participant explained, "My brother was there when I was a freshman...everyone loved him. Everyone respected him ... I really wanted to go off of his example." Another participant said, "I wanted to belong because I had two older brothers who were there...I think that was the root of everything and then kind of smaller reasons continued, like a drive to want to fit in more." The third participant that stated family members at the school was a legacy student. "My dad graduated in '80, my uncle graduated in '90, and then my cousin, who was my best friend was there the year before me...so the aspect of family and community...I truly believe is on campus there."

**Faculty Members.** The legacy study participant above went on to say faculty that also went to the school aided in his feeling of belonging: "guys like K D, he went to the School ... he's been through it ... he knows what The School can be...that was probably the biggest thing for me." Three other participants stated faculty members were one of their motivations for belonging at the School. Having faculty members that were alumni was important according to participants' responses: "I found a lot of people I respected...Mr. G (an alumna), I liked their work ethic ... how they carried themselves." Another participant stated the importance of known adults in their lives aided in a sense of belonging. "The coaches were your teachers ... you're with them all day ... your coach will definitely have an influence on whether you felt belonging ... my coach was there for the four years ... my biggest role model ... I think that really had a big impact."

## **Perceptions**

### ***Community***

While all study participants agreed they had positive personal feelings of belonging at The School, either before they arrived or during their experience, 20 out of 26 study participants shared how and where these perceptions of belonging originated. The generalized concepts of feelings included community, familiarity, and inclusivity. Additionally, the comments were evenly divided between 10 scholarship students and 10 non-scholarship students. These perceptions of their experience are consistent with the integrated belonging framework of Allen et al. (2021).

**Positive, Welcoming Community.** Participants indicated they sought close friends and found them, "so the friendships definitely were something you kind of expected, and that turned out to be true." Friendships especially long-standing, authentic friendships are necessary for belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally, participants stated that friendships as part of feeling like being part of a community. As one participant explained, "I was expecting a positive community and one that was welcoming, and I think I had that for the most part."

**Faculty Lead Community.** One participant stated, "being a people person, community, feeling that I was looking for helped me...there aren't many better places where you can just go up and say hi to all your teachers." Others described the sense of belonging at The School as "family and community." Their sense of belonging from the faculty was expressed as "they did a good job...always monitoring us, making sure we didn't do anything stupid ... I thought they care about and made sure that [we] were actually doing all right." Another participant stated, "all the faculty were just making sure

we have everything we need.” The same student confessed, “oh it was a pleasant surprise, I didn’t expect the faculty to be so well.” The faculty of The School positively contributed to the sense of community and belonging.

### ***Familiarity***

As one participant stated, "It was really comforting to have like the same people around me." This view was echoed by other participants. This study further showed how familiarity contributes to a sense of belonging. One participant stated, "I went to summer camp, so I was familiar with the area." A second participant had a similar insight: "my sister went to [A School] right up the street...so she told me what it was like." Another participant shared, "The School [was] not that prep school feel, it really felt like a home." Other participants like this one stated the positive feeling of familiarity more generally, "I just like immediately had a good feeling when I came to school."

**Prior Knowledge.** Whether the perception of familiarity was self-initiated or presented to the students, the perception was consistent. A participant stated that when they spoke of the sense of familiarity, it came from associating it with people he knew:

One of my friends from home already got it in. I knew he would be there. I knew a couple of kids from my hometown that were already students there, so I knew people there and who I might hang out with.

The findings demonstrated the students had a sense of understanding of The School, even before applying for school. Many participants stated they knew about the school a year or two before they applied to be admitted.

**Social Media.** Two participants stated they developed preconceived notions of belonging through the school's social media posts. One participant said, "I would see

pictures about [the School] on Instagram and stuff, and then it finally happened, that was very welcoming and just a perfect first day." Another participant stated: "you see on Instagram and everything, they welcome students." While these posts did not initially include the participants, the social media post presupposed a sense of belonging to the incoming students.

### ***Inclusive***

**Closeness.** Often a factor in a sense of belonging is if a person feels included. Either consciously or subconsciously, most human beings evaluate whether they belong with, those around them and have a sense of security (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). One participant stated:

I hoped coming in that I'd have that kind of closeness, and I realize now that I definitely do feel like I grew very close to my high school friends a lot faster than I would have in a normal high school. Everyone was coming in new really helps me to feel like there was still a chance like I wasn't trying to invade a friend group...it was a lot easier to make friends because everyone was trying to make friends.

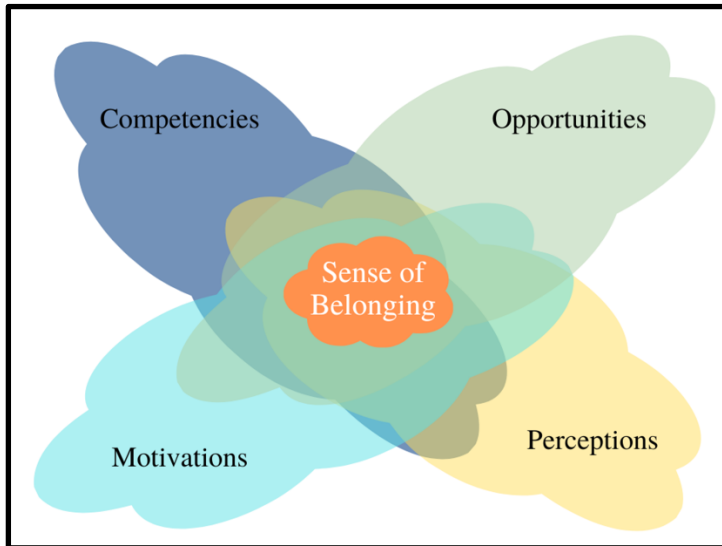
There were stated examples of feeling secure that aided in positive perceptions of belonging, such as "I talked to people that I think maybe I wouldn't have talked to on a regular basis."

**Non-inclusive perceptions.** Three participants, one of which was a full pay student, indicated that they thought financial status was going to be a significant aspect of the school community. As one participant stated, "I thought the wealth divide was going to be on a much larger emotional side." Another stated, "(I) would be considered a prep

school kid...people think I have money.” Lastly, a participant stated, “...prep school, you’re thinking, they drive a nice car, they have nice clothes.” However, all three participants stated their perceptions were incorrect. Instead, they learned their fellow students were "super down to earth" and "regular people." The pre-imagined understanding the participants shared changed after their lived experience.

### **Belonging**

The integrated framework of belonging (Allen et al., 2021) illustrated in figure 10 states the four components of belonging: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions. All 26 participants had positive examples of each of the components, as shown in the previous interviews earlier in the chapter. However, when asked the question in the interview protocol, "Did you feel like you belonged at The School? In other words, did you feel accepted, respected, included, supported at The School?" only two participants answered negatively. One student was a low-income scholarship student and the other was a non-scholarship student. The other 24 students answered unequivocally, "yes," they felt like they belonged.

**Figure 4.9***Integrated Framework of Belonging*

*Note.* Framework adapted from Allen, K., Kern, M.L., Rozek, C., & Slavich, G. (2021).

Belonging: A review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research. *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73(1), 93.

***Connected***

Of the participants, 24 participants answered positively when asked how connected they felt at The School. Many participants used the word “matched” to describe their connection. This study used the word “match” in the open-ended question.

***Supported***

All participants reported feeling supported at The School. Of the participants, 26 could name one or more adult they described as being “supportive.” Even the two students who described not feeling a sense of belonging at The School reported having one trusted adult during their years as a student.

***Valued***

The researcher asked if the students “felt like the school values financial aid students and full pay students the same,” and all participants answered positively or stated they did not know any different. Many participants stated it was not even known what a student’s scholarship status was.

**Fit**

Open-ended interview prompts were used to answer the research question, “How did a sense of belonging form in a secondary school setting compare between two groups of students: scholarship and non-scholarship?” as outlined in chapter two. The final open-ended interview question, “Did you feel like you belong at the school?” was answered positively by 24 student participants. The answer “fit” was given by 12 scholarship students and 12 non-scholarship students. “Fit” was used as a term to describe the positive match of expectations between the student and the lived school environment. The word “fit” was used 24 times by participants to describe belonging at The School. This is especially of interest because the second part of the question was, “In other words, did you feel accepted, respected, included, supported at The School?” Many participants stated, “I fit there perfectly.” Another participant stated, “I don't think I could picture myself anywhere else.” One participant shared, “I literally never felt not at home...I fit like I felt right at home like honestly, The School was like the best times in my life.”

***Access.*** The participants used ideas associated with access to describe how they “fit” at The School. The statement of “there is always a place for you” was echoed by many participants. One participant shared, “I was very lucky ... I was able to find that sense of belonging in the community, that love of the campus and love of culture ... in

multiple parts of campus which makes me feel like The School was a really good fit for me.”

**Physical Locations.** The participants described access to locations to be with other students. One participant shared “in the student center ... there was always someone I could sit with or hang out with. Specifically, one participant stated, “you could go to your teacher’s house at night and ask them for help with homework or anything.” Another participant stated, “I fit right in. I always wanted to be at the rink or in the gym and a lot of other people there are always, go, go, go!”

**Valued.** A student stated, “I fit really well ... I definitely fit well with the school, more like a sports school...I think that was definitely much easier to be there playing a sport.” This study’s findings showed being valued was not limited to only sports. One participant stated, “another outlet I think I found that wasn’t sports related for me...I think The School found the other side of me and I’ve never liked arts.” Another student stated, “I felt like I fit really, really well...for athletics or art projects...every one of my peers was kind of doing very similar things that I was doing.”

**Supported.** One participant stated The School has "a pretty amazing support system...one that really promotes growth." The findings in this study had variations of this same statement with nine other participants. Participants reported The School support made them feel "secure," "connected," and "accepted." One participant stated that "...no matter where you came from you're welcome with opening arms."

A particular student on scholarship stated, "I just felt so supported and included with anything I did there...I want to work there." Returning to visit the school or

returning to visit faculty at school was a theme stated by two additional participants: "I still go back and visit" and "I still talk to my advisor."

Sense of belonging was found to be equal among two groups of students, low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students. Educational practitioners can foster a sense of belonging by focusing on four interrelated areas of belonging (Allen et al., 2021): motivations (needs or desires to connect with others); competencies (positive examples of feeling able and skilled to belong); perceptions (subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experience); and opportunities (access to people, groups, places, and times that enabled belonging to occur).

### **Limitations**

Even though this study adds to the body of research existing on a sense of belonging, there are limitations. The research attempted to obtain a diverse sample. Although 324 names from three matriculated classes of students were provided to the researcher, only 156 students met the criteria of being low-income, scholarship students, or non-scholarship students. Of those 156 students, 28 students consented to be interviewed. Two students self-reported incorrectly when criteria was referenced with the cooperating institution. Time constraints and limitations to contacting students other than email were limitations in necessary participants. The participants were 59% female and 41%, male. Figure 2 displays data based on race: 92% White, 4% Black, and 4% Hispanic. Participant data were based on ethnicity 92% White alone, 4% Black or African American, and 4% Hispanic.

The participant sample was 14% age 18, 22.2% age 19, 31.1% age 20, and 32.7% age 21. Most participants were in college and therefore in areas across the United States,

with one participant in Florence, Italy. The participants were recruited through a snowball sample recruitment process. This process was not originally intended; however, only two indications of interest surveys were completed with the first series of bulk emails to participate. This led the researcher to return to Plymouth State University Institutional Review Board with a revised application to ask for referrals. The frequency and number of participants indicating interest drastically changed during this time; unfortunately resulting in most interviews being completed in August and September 2022.

Another limitation was the researcher was an employee of the cooperating institution. While research bias can always exist, the researcher had not worked for the institution since 2016. No participant was a student of the researcher. There was a necessity to seek students who recently matriculated from the institution, otherwise, a different age population would have been helpful to consider. The research declares no conflict of interest regarding this work.

Lastly, the use of one institution for the case study was a limitation. Due only one researcher, a finite number of participants was necessary. Only using one institution limits the generatability of the findings.

### **Organization and Field Impacts**

Twenty-six participants were interviewed and all the students discussed insightfully the topic of belonging using Allen et al.'s model of belonging (2021). This is a success. All participants had relatable personal examples. Thus, the model should be reapplied to future studies.

Stakeholders such as public and independent schools, after-school programs, sports academies, experiential programs, or residential programs that encourage a sense

of belonging can benefit from the results of this study. Results from this study can be used to create promising practices for students and organizations to follow. The practices of greatest impact are the clarity of definition of belonging, specifically the four integrated areas of competencies, perspectives, opportunities, and motivations.

Educational leaders working with adolescents can improve their institutional definition of belonging by comparing institutional terms with Allen et al.'s integrated model (2021). In many cases, institutions may find Allen's model to be superior to their school's existing working definition of belonging.

The contribution of an agreed-upon definition will allow adults and students, students and students, and even adult and adult conversations to use the same vocabulary to share emotions, share ideas, learn, and grow. A common framework of belonging with a common vocabulary will lead to common understanding and eventually agreed-upon assessment levels of belonging. The understanding of these areas is demonstrated by illustrating how and where belonging occurs among students in an independent secondary school environment. Additionally, findings illustrated the 26 participants understood how the areas integrated into a collective sense of belonging. Recommendations for expanding on the practices of belonging understanding include developing the scope of how belonging integrates with other significant aspects of access, inclusivity, and acceptance.

### **Recommendations for Advocacy**

A major finding of this study is the potential that an established framework of belonging can have on future conversations in adolescent student environments, specifically adults' awareness of belonging among the students in their care. Each of the 26 participants stated they understood what belonging was from the integrated framework

used and they had a way to begin to recognize how and where belonging was fostered in the independent school environment. Students reported positive experiences and the findings demonstrated that the narrative reflections aided in deepening their understanding and appreciation for their connection to the school. The understanding of belonging was shared by the individual. This researcher recommends that school policymakers and change agents should provide a bigger-picture perspective on belonging. A whole-school approach to stating and discussing belonging is recommended over focusing on discussions of belonging at the individual level.

The narrative inquiry and the plurality of questions on various aspects of belonging created narratives that were multidimensional and dynamic. The participants were in the specific school environment for multiple years. One challenge is that a sense of belonging is inherently difficult to measure over time because a sense of belonging can shift as one's attachment to a place is not static (Manzo, 2003). The lack of measurement of time in Allen et al.'s integrated framework is both a benefit and a point of further consideration. It is particularly important to also examine the contributing factors to students on scholarship being able to feel a sense of belonging. There is an opportunity to study further on the areas of belonging that include: establishing an industry standard integrated framework for belonging, studying more specific student populations even within the independent secondary school environment, furthering the predictors for belonging, and especially examining the occurrence of non-belong with student populations.

The advancement of belonging is necessary for school leaders to make a daily habit among students, staff, and faculty. Belonging cannot be a burden to any one

student, especially students from marginalized groups. Based on the insights yielded from this study, secondary independent students have a sense of belonging that is formed by a variety of factors. Clearly, peer and adult relationships are central to the development of a sense of belonging. School leaders, educators, and psychologists have more control over factors of belonging than individual students. There is value in moving belonging frameworks to a macro level in school publications and posting, curricular inclusion, designated spaces, student organization, and faculty professional development.

### **Recommendation One: Apply an Integrated Framework of Belonging**

To understand the sense of belonging in the stories, an integrated framework of belonging (Allen, et al., 2021) is used. The framework helps this researcher have a manner to code the student stories into themes. The framework posits that competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions are central elements in strategies that can be used to better understand an individual's sense of belonging to an environment, in this case, an independent secondary school environment. The finding in this study confirms the strategies can be useful in improving perceptions of belonging for secondary teacher professional development, pedagogy, curriculum design, and influence educational leaders to better understand a sense of belonging with secondary independent students.

### ***Four Components of Belonging***

The framework was determined to be an invaluable tool for establishing questions that allowed participants to share their personal stories of belonging. While the use of the specific words "competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions" were not used in this study, participants answered questions directly relating to the terms. The declarative responses and lack of significant participant clarification are further evidence

of the effectiveness of the framework. Allen et al. (2021) created an integrated framework for defining and measuring belonging and describing a dynamic social system, such as a school environment. Schools should post visuals of the framework of belonging, the same way visuals of diversity, equity, and inclusion and LGBTQ visuals are posted in school environments. A belonging framework visual poster will promote necessary conversation among stakeholders and demonstrate the importance of the sense of belonging.

**No Recipe for Belonging.** Findings from this study also reveal there is no exact ratio, proportion, or order of ingredients for belonging. While the raw components were not reported by the participants, no clear pattern or combination of components emerged. Figure 10 below demonstrates the integrated concepts are not in distinguishable ratios, while findings determined the individual combinations to yield a sense of belonging in 24 of the 26 participants in the study.

**Use of an Integrated Framework.** An action step for educators, especially secondary school educators should be an incorporation of an integrated framework for belonging as an element of assessing student wellbeing. The findings underscore the value of student-teacher and student-student relationship. The value of implementing a whole-school intervention of assessing belonging and thus creating a supportive atmosphere that emphasizes the importance of belonging. A definition of belonging, such as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80) is commonly accepted however, they do not capture the dynamic interconnected aspect of belonging, especially belonging over time. A student belonging framework should be

published, posted, and visible in schools. When the understanding of belonging is known, then it should be measured in all school environments. A standardized published integrated framework would aid in making common vocabulary of belonging known and comparable.

### **Recommendation Two: Collective-orientated activities**

Based on the insights yielded for this study, the sense of belonging between two groups of students, low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students, was not significantly different. By examining stories of their lived experience, this researcher's study did not confirm research in higher education that examined students' struggles to belong, which are particularly reported by minorities and other historically marginalized groups (Bettencourt, 2021). This study revealed assets, though it did not significantly reveal barriers that impacted equity and access for students at a secondary private school level. These findings diverge from research based on higher education (Bettencourt, 2021; Soria & Bultmann, 2014; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). While more detailed recommendations and actions steps are explained below, more research needs to be conducted at the secondary school level, especially the independent boarding school level to further illustrate differences between higher education studies of belonging and secondary independent school models that include a component of residential life, co-curriculars, and academics. Further studies have the potential to determine the validity of divergent findings in this research.

**Collective Activities.** The independent school programmatic model is designed for collective or group activities. Unlike higher education, all students always live in dormitories for up to four years. All students are required to either play on sports teams

or in participate in performing arts for at least three years. 80% of student participants stated the school program is a leading contributor to their sense of belonging. These findings suggest that participation in live-in housing, performing arts, or athletic teams may result in a deeper sense of belonging. The findings in this study recommend that institutions focus on collective rather than individual-orientated activities. Further student groups and specific activities designed to foster belonging are recommended. While finding activities have a benefit of belonging, schools may benefit from having a wider array of activities beyond sports or arts to create a supportive atmosphere and environment of belonging.

**Narrow student participation demographics.** Further research should be conducted on a boarding student population at the secondary level. Unlike higher education, the secondary independent school does not have work-study programs for students on financial aid. The visible difference is students are not visually separated from full-pay or non-scholarship students. In a secondary independent school, there are fewer visual reminders of who is on financial aid, who is low-income, and who is not. A collective activity program and the absence of visual differences between students on financial aid and those not, speak to the need to do further research at the secondary level. This researcher recommends the retrospective research method, as students aged 18-21 were capable and qualified to reflect on their secondary experiences in an independent school.

Additionally, early findings from this research reported higher understandings and a more pronounced need for belonging among boarding students over day students. Practitioners should narrow and separate the student populations for future research.

Future studies should delineate student populations separately to isolate barriers to belonging and highlight a facet of belonging as relevant and important to student well-being.

### **Recommendation Three: Independent School Sense of Community and Place**

Results from this study support the importance of schools, specifically school leaders and teachers fostering school belonging. Schools should pay attention to not undermine the simplicity of students' descriptions of a school community like a family. While seemingly simplistic, it is also important. Many participants described their sense of belonging as "like family." "Community" was a repeated term from participants as much as "fit" to describe their sense of belonging. Participants used "family" and "community" as a significant attribute to determine "fit." A recommendation for future research is to compare the independent school approach to public school systems. Findings from this research reveal a unique attachment to the place and peers in an independent school environment, perhaps because of living at the school. Future studies could compare differences between independent schools and public schools, especially concerning place attachment and peer association. The advancement of school belonging research is important for schools to foster student well-being.

#### ***Place Attachment***

A major finding of this study was the demonstrated importance of place attachment. Schools once designed for affluent students are now giving access to marginalized groups of adolescents. This confirms current research on levels of belonging concerning social routines and the location in which someone lives (Allen et al., 2018; Arcidiacono et al., 2007; Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Findings

from this research confirm participants' overwhelming deep attachment to the independent school environment. Greater access to financial aid and scholarship opportunities needs to be prioritized by independent schools. A first step is the school's need to evaluate the amount of scholarship given to minority groups to discourage privilege from being connected to belonging.

### ***Place and Peer Association***

Consistent with past research, characteristics such as teacher support and positive personal characteristics (academic motivation, emotional stability, engagement in extracurricular activities, and belief in school safety) were the strongest predictors of school belonging among secondary students (Allen et al., 2018). Findings in this research confirm academic motivation, engagement in extracurricular activities, and peer association characteristics lead to a clear benefit of peer association beyond teacher support and personal characteristics. Leaders in Independent Schools should emphasize the positive role place and peer association have on predictors of belonging. Questions on evaluating and including belonging should be included in student admission processes, hiring practices, and governance recruitment. Given the importance of belonging it should be included in the determination of a school's population.

### **Recommendation Four: A Deeper Understanding of a Sense of Non-belonging**

While an integrated framework of belonging was used to demonstrate how and where a sense of belonging was shown in an independent secondary school environment, it is recommended that future action steps focus on measuring the level of belonging and non-belonging. These findings show the need to continue to explore how different groups of students experience a sense of belonging. Most participants in this study volunteered

because of their positive association with the [School]. Additionally, future research could add to the selection criteria, students who had negative feelings of belonging or difficulty belonging. While positive attributes have been researched, a deeper examination of detractors or barriers to belonging should be a focus of future research.

### **Reflective Summary**

Reflecting upon the findings and recommendations of this research, additional research interviewing school leaders, healthcare professionals, dormitory heads, faculty members, and coaches would have been beneficial. A more comprehensive interview pool would have aided in a deeper understanding of any whole-school approaches to supporting belonging at the cooperative school.

The opportunity to participate in the research should have been offered to a broader range of schools. The choice of the participating school was due to an early volunteer rather than being chosen from a plurality of volunteering schools. The researcher could have offered this opportunity to peer schools, although this would then require selection criteria and process.

Recruitment was certainly a barrier to the study. In the future, it would be beneficial to communicate beyond email solicitation. A presentation at the cooperating school is a possibility that could aid in a broader depth of participants and is something this researcher could have done to bring a higher yield of participants to the study. At one point, a cell phone SMS-based solicitation was proposed to the cooperating school, however, few young alumni listed their cell phone numbers with the alumni office at the cooperating school. Ultimately, the snowball referral process was effective, yet it required excessive time.

Through this action research study, this researcher learned several key lessons as an educational leader in the field of independent schools. These findings show the need to assess the level of belonging students report at the secondary school level. Belonging was explained by the participants as an individual endeavor. Thus, a lesson this researcher learned was the need for a bigger-picture perspective on whole-school approaches to belonging. A specific lesson learned from the research is, to inquire about individual interventions for non-belonging. In other words, ask the school administration what school support structures exist if a student is not feeling accepted, welcomed, and included by the school. With this understanding, more whole-school professional development opportunities can be created.

The personal attribute of this researcher that benefited this study was the ease of conversations with the participants. Additionally, the simplicity of the scheduling and the use of calendly.com was significant in allowing participants to arrange their interviews. Likewise, the opportunity to ask college-age students to reflect on their experiences in secondary school reinvigorated this researcher's belief in the need to focus on student well-being.

Further research is needed to determine the barriers and benefits of belonging, specifically for students from marginalized backgrounds. Collaboration with more socio-economically and ethnically diverse stakeholders could improve the problem of practice of differing levels of belonging among students at the same school. Schools need to create a metric to measure belonging. Schools have objective measurements for academic performance. What was learned from this case study was, the participants could benefit

from a measurement to gauge their sense of belonging. Specifically, a more streamlined measurement tool than a series of interview questions.

This researcher is scheduled to present these findings and the integrated framework of belonging at the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) annual conference on February 22, 2023. The presentation is titled Designing for Belonging and is scheduled for a three-hour workshop available for 5,000 participants with the conference theme of Cultivating Community. This venue is significant for the topic of belonging research and aims to share the findings of belonging research more broadly.

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**Appendices**

## Appendix A

RQ 1: How does a sense of belonging form in a secondary school setting compare between two groups of students: scholarship and non-scholarship?

1) How connected do you feel on campus? 1) How supportive do you feel like the school is to students from different class backgrounds? 1c) If I asked you if you feel like the school values scholarship and full-pay students the same, what would you say? 1d) Do you feel like you belong at this school? (Bettencourt, 2021).

RQ 2: How/where is belonging forming in the following interrelated areas: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions? (Allen et al., 2021).

RQ 2a: Competencies: Students having a set of skills and abilities needed to connect and experience belonging.

a) What skills or abilities did you feel you have to help you feel you belong at this school? b) What skills or strategies did others help you develop to feel like you belong while you were at this school? (Allen et al., 2021).

RQ 2b: Opportunities: Students having the ability of groups, people, places, times, and spaces that enable belonging to occur.

a) What specific events or programs enable you to feel like you belong? b) What specific events or programs were barriers to or reduced your sense of belonging? c) Which type of students, staff, or faculty enable you to feel like you belong? d) Which type of students, staff, or faculty were barriers or reduced your sense of belonging? (Allen et al., 2021).

RQ 2c: Motivations: Students need or desire to connect with others

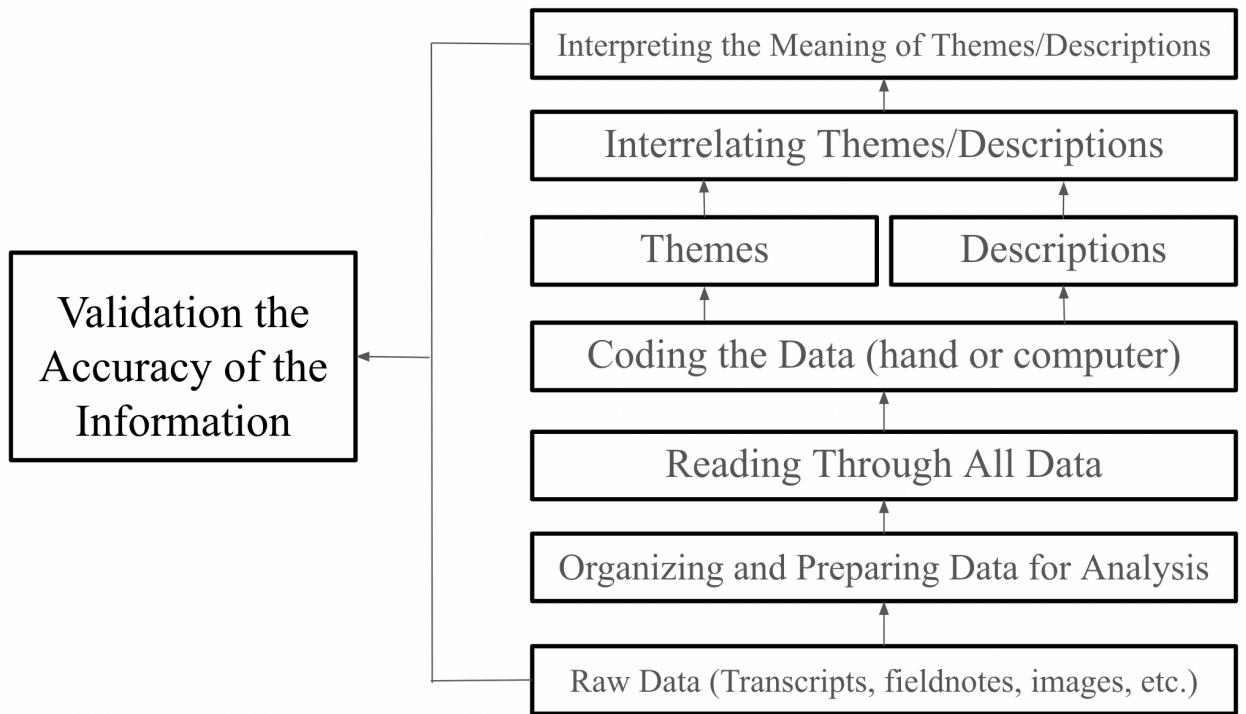
a) How would you describe your inner drive to belong at this school? (Allen et al., 2021).

RQ 2d: Perceptions: Students' subjective feelings and cognitions concerning their experience

a) Describe some positive experiences of belonging at this school. b) Describe some negative experiences of belonging at this school? (Allen et al., 2021).

**Appendix B**

*Note:* Creswell and Creswell’s data analysis workflow (2018)



### Appendix C

Tesch's Eight Steps in the Coding Process	
1.	Get a sense of the whole. Read all the transcripts carefully. Perhaps jot down some ideas as they come to mind as you read.
2.	Pick one document (i.e., one interview) --the most interesting one, the shortest, the one on the top of the pile. Go through it, asking yourself, "What is this about?" Do not think about the substance of the information but its underlying message. Write thoughts in the margins.
3.	When you have completed this task for several participants, make a list of all topics. Cluster together similar topics. Form these topics into columns, perhaps arrayed as major, unique, and leftover topics.
4.	Now take this list and go back to your data. Abbreviate the topics as codes and write the codes next to the appropriate segment of the text. Try this preliminary organizing scheme to see if new categories and codes emerge.
5.	Find the most descriptive wording for your topics and turn them into categories. Look for ways of reducing your total list of categories by grouping topics that relate to each other. Perhaps draw lines between categories to show interrelationships.
6.	Make a final decision on the abbreviation for each category and alphabetize these codes.
7.	Assemble the data material belonging to each category in one place and perform a preliminary analysis.
8.	If necessary, recode your existing data.

## Appendix D



### Institutional Review Board

Date May 31, 2022

Dear Daniel W. Love

**Study:** Perceptions of Belonging in Secondary Independent School: A Retrospective Case Study Comparing Experiences of Former Scholarship and Non-Scholarship Students

**Approval Date:** May 31, 2022

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Exempt as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 101(b). Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol. Be sure to complete the Final Report Form when your research is finished.

If, during the course of your project you intend to make changes that may significantly affect the human subjects involved (particularly methodological changes), you must obtain IRB approval prior to implementing these changes. Any unanticipated problems related to your use of human subjects must be promptly reported to the IRB. The IRB may be contacted through Dr. Clarissa M. Palmer, Chair of the IRB. This is required so that the IRB can update or revise protective measures for human subjects as may be necessary.

You are expected to maintain as an essential part of your project records, any records pertaining to the use of humans as subjects in your research. This includes any information or materials conveyed to and received from the subjects as well as any executed forms, data and analysis results. If this is a funded project (federal, state, private, other organization), you should be aware that these records are subject to inspection and review by authorized representatives of the University, State of New Hampshire, and/or the federal government.

Please note that IRB approval cannot exceed one year. If you expect your project to continue beyond this approval period, you must submit a request for continuance to the IRB for renewal of IRB approval. IRB approval must be obtained and maintained for the entire term of your project or award.

Please notify the IRB in writing when the project is completed. We may ask that you provide information regarding your experiences with human subjects and with the IRB review process. Upon notification, we will close our files pertaining to your project. Any subsequent reactivation of the project will require a new IRB application. I have attached the Project Completion Form for your convenience.

Please do not hesitate to contact the IRB if you have any questions or require assistance. We will be happy to assist you in any way we can. Thank you for your cooperation and efforts throughout this review process. We wish you success in this endeavor.

Sincerely,

Clarissa M. Palmer, PhD  
Institutional Review Board  
Psu-irb@plymouth.edu



## Institutional Review Board

|  
Date August 19, 2022

Dear Dan Love

**Study:** Revised/Modifications to: Perceptions of Belonging in Secondary Independent School: A Retrospective Case Study Comparing Experiences of Former Scholarship and Non-Scholarship Students  
**Approval Date:** August 19, 2022

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Exempt as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 1101(b). Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol. Be sure to complete the Final Report Form when your research is finished.

If, during the course of your project you intend to make changes that may significantly affect the human subjects involved (particularly methodological changes), you must obtain IRB approval prior to implementing these changes. Any unanticipated problems related to your use of human subjects must be promptly reported to the IRB. The IRB may be contacted through Dr. Clarissa M. Palmer, Chair of the IRB. This is required so that the IRB can update or revise protective measures for human subjects as may be necessary.

You are expected to maintain as an essential part of your project records, any records pertaining to the use of humans as subjects in your research. This includes any information or materials conveyed to and received from the subjects as well as any executed forms, data and analysis results. If this is a funded project (federal, state, private, other organization), you should be aware that these records are subject to inspection and review by authorized representatives of the University, State of New Hampshire, and/or the federal government.

Please note that IRB approval cannot exceed one year. If you expect your project to continue beyond this approval period, you must submit a request for continuance to the IRB for renewal of IRB approval. IRB approval must be obtained and maintained for the entire term of your project or award.

Please notify the IRB in writing when the project is completed. We may ask that you provide information regarding your experiences with human subjects and with the IRB review process. Upon notification, we will close our files pertaining to your project. Any subsequent reactivation of the project will require a new IRB application. I have attached the Project Completion Form for your convenience.

Please do not hesitate to contact the IRB if you have any questions or require assistance. We will be happy to assist you in any way we can. Thank you for your cooperation and efforts throughout this review process. We wish you success in this endeavor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive, appearing to read "Clarissa M. Palmer", written in black ink on a light-colored background.

Clarissa M. Palmer, PhD  
Institutional Review Board

## Appendix E

### Human Subjects Research Final Report October 16, 2022

**Investigator:**

Name Daniel W. Love

Position Student

Phone Number 603.530.1782

Email [dwlove@plymouth.edu](mailto:dwlove@plymouth.edu)

Faculty Advisor Name (if applicable) Suzanne Gaulocher at

[smgaulocher@plymouth.edu](mailto:smgaulocher@plymouth.edu)

**Study Title:** Perceptions of Belonging in Secondary Independent School: A Retrospective Case Study Comparing Experiences of Former Scholarship and Non-Scholarship Students

*Upon completion of your study, please provide the information requested below and submit to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) along with a report of findings for this study, for audit purposes. Copies of abstracts, articles, and/or publications specific to the project are acceptable. Send the report to the IRB at [psu-irb@plymouth.edu](mailto:psu-irb@plymouth.edu).*

1. Please give termination date of study's intervention or interaction with participant data:

**September 30, 2022**

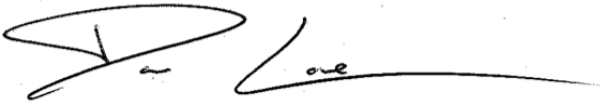
2. How many people were studied in your research? 26

3. Did you conduct the research in accordance with the procedures reviewed and approved by the IRB? (If NO, please describe on a separate sheet)

**YES**

4. Did any problems emerge or were any serious unexpected adverse subject experiences observed? Yes or No (If YES, please describe on a separate sheet) **NO**

Principal Investigator or Advisor Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



**Appendix F**

## Recruitment Statement

Have you ever thought about your sense of belonging at New Hampton School? I am a Plymouth State University doctoral student seeking individuals who attended New Hampton School. Specifically, I am researching student perception on their sense of belonging at independent boarding schools. I would like to hear from you about how you felt about your experience of feeling welcomed, at home, and/or included at New Hampton School. There is nothing you need to prepare ahead of time, I will ask questions to help you share your personal story. I am looking for both positive and negative experiences. I would like to learn from you about what it is like to share your story and any experiences following your contribution. Please contact me at [dwlove@plymouth.edu](mailto:dwlove@plymouth.edu) to learn more about this opportunity. Please complete the three question survey and confirm your contact information here [LINK TO SURVEY](#).

Any questions contact me at [dwlove@plymouth.edu](mailto:dwlove@plymouth.edu) to learn more about this opportunity.

**Appendix G**

## Informed Consent

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

## VOLUNTARILY IN A RESEARCH INVESTIGATION

## PLYMOUTH STATE UNIVERSITY

**INVESTIGATOR(S) NAME:** Daniel W. Love**STUDY TITLE:** Youth Perceptions of Belonging Between Two Groups, Scholarship and Non-Scholarship Students: A Case Study**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to determine the sense of belonging between two groups of students, low-income scholarship students and non-scholarship students by examining stories of your lived experience.

You are being asked to participate in the study because you are someone who has attended New Hampton School and are either someone who has benefited from a scholarship or someone who was not in need of a scholarship.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY**

During this study participants will be asked to share their experience in an in-depth interview. Interviews will be approximately one hour over secure videoconferencing software, Zoom. Participants may choose opt out of using video and only converse with the researcher via audio. After each interview, participants may be provided transcripts of notes and interviews and asked to verify, clarify, and indicate any needed corrections if desired.

**Describe any anticipated costs associated with being in study such as travel to be a participant in the study. If there are no known costs, clearly indicate.**

There are no costs related for participation in this study.

### **RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

As a participant in this study, minimal risk is anticipated but due to the focus of the study.

However, at any time you wish to opt out of the study you can.

### **BENEFITS**

Potential benefits that participants may attain from participation in this research study include: greater understanding of their your sense of belonging in your high school years. Additionally, your input could inform the policies and practices of other independent schools to increase the sense of access and equity of programs for welcoming students to an independent school.

### **ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES**

No alternative procedures are available for this study.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All documents and information pertaining to this research study will be kept confidential in accordance with all applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations. Data generated by the study may be reviewed by Plymouth State University's Institutional Review Board, which is the committee responsible for ensuring my welfare and rights as a research participant, to assure proper conduct of the study and compliance with university regulations. If any presentations or publication result from this research, you will not be identified by name.

The information collected during participation in this study will be kept on my encrypted computer in a cloud based secured storage. Additionally, your confidentiality will be protected by the use of anonymous names for yourself and the school. The school will only be identified as an independent school in New England. You will also be able to read all final reports to ensure there that no unforeseen indication of your identity or the school's identity arises.

I plan to maintain the confidentiality of all data and records associated with your participation in this research. There are, however, rare instances when I may be required to share individually identifiable information with the following:

- Officials at Plymouth State University (PSU),
- Regulatory and oversight government agencies, or

I also may be required by law to report certain information:

- To government and/or law enforcement officials (for example, child abuse, threatened violence against self or others, or hazing). If I believe that such a report is required, I will follow the guidance of the PSU Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (and of the University's General Counsel) in making any such report, in order to provide as much protection for your privacy as possible while still complying with the law.
- To appropriate PSU authorities (e.g., disclosures involving Sexual Violence - which includes sexual harassment, sexual assault, unwanted sexual contact, sexual misconduct, domestic violence, relationship abuse, stalking [including cyber-stalking] and dating violence - must be reported to the PSU Title IX Coordinator or PSU Police).

Further, any communication via the internet poses minimal risk of a breach of confidentiality.

To help protect the confidentiality of your information, all data will be maintained and accessed by this researcher through the Plymouth State University secure Box system. This researcher will share one transcript with another student researcher, Marguerite Corvini. Marguerite Corvini will only be provided with this one transcript to assist with the reliability of coding. All transcripts from interviews will be deidentified by assigning a pseudonym.

No information will be shared with a third-party data processor.

All audio and videorecordings will be saved in the secure Box file with transcripts. All of these files will be deidentified.

I will report the data aggregate using pseudonyms. The results may be used in a final dissertation, and then future reports, presentations, and publications.

### **TERMINATION OF PARTICIPATION**

You may choose to withdraw from this study at any time and for any reason. If you choose to drop out of the study, you will contact the investigator and my research records will be destroyed.

### **COMPENSATION**

You will not receive payment for being in this study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. There will be no cost to me for participating in this research.

### **INJURY COMPENSATION**

Neither Plymouth State University nor any government or other agency funding this research project will provide special services, free care, or compensation for any injuries resulting from this research. Treatment for such injuries will be at my expense and/or paid through my medical plan.

### **QUESTIONS**

If you have further questions about this study, you may contact Daniel W Love, at [dwlove@plymouth.edu](mailto:dwlove@plymouth.edu) You may also reach out to Suzanne Gaulocher, Daniel's supervisor, at [smgaulocher@plymouth.edu](mailto:smgaulocher@plymouth.edu) for additional questions. If you have any questions about the rights of research participants, you may call the Chairperson of the Plymouth State University's Institutional Review Board at (603) 535-3114 (Valid until July 31, 2021).

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and that refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to me. You are free to withdraw or refuse consent, or to discontinue participation in this study at any time without penalty or consequence.

If you voluntarily give your consent to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be provided with a signed copy of this consent.

Signatures:

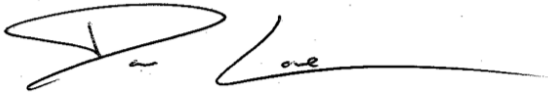
\_\_\_\_\_  
Participants Name (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I, the undersigned, certify that to the best of my knowledge, the subject signing this consent form has had the study fully and carefully explained by me and have been given an opportunity to ask any questions regarding the nature, risks, and benefits of participation in this research study.

Daniel W. Love, Student.  
Investigator's Name (Print)



Investigator's Signature

Date: 2/15/22

Plymouth State University's IRB has approved the solicitation of participants for the study until

May 21, 2023