From: USC Student Health - Office for Health Promotion Strategy,
              Backbone for the USC Well-being Collective

Title: Fall 2020 Focus Group Report: Creating an Inclusive [Online] Campus Community

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The resurgence of the national Black Lives Matter movement has led to heightened attention to the university's climate of equity, diversity, and inclusion. In spring 2020 semester, university leadership responded with specific actions, including the renaming of the Von KleinSmid campus building, forming a community advisory board for the Department of Public Safety, and a renewed charge for the Provost's DEI Task Force, among other changes. However, there is much work to be done until students of all backgrounds feel valued as members of the Trojan Family. As demonstrated by results of the Student Well-being Index Survey (SWIS) in spring 2020, significant inequities in sense of belonging are experienced by different student groups. In SWIS, sense of belonging is determined by a composite index of five statements such as "*I feel I belong at this school*" and *"I have found one or more communities or groups where I feel I belong at this school.*" Data collected from the SWIS demonstrated that only 67% of Indigenous and Black/African American students report being treated fairly and equitably in the classroom compared to 80% or more of students from other races/ethnicities. Additionally, mixed-race and Black/African American students were 1.3 times less likely than White students to have a positive sense of belonging. While the Office of the President announced there would be university forums for input specifically for Black/African American students, this research aims to garner input and ideas from all students to determine their role in fostering an inclusive campus community.

METHODOLOGY

The USC Student Health - Office for Health Promotion Strategy, in partnership with student Community Health Organizers (CHOs), conducted focus groups via Zoom during the fall 2020 semester. CHOs are undergraduate and graduate USC students employed by the USC Student Health Office for Health Promotion Strategy. CHOs receive rigorous training in qualitative research, including study design, recruitment, facilitation, and analysis. These students, with guidance from professional staff in the Office for Health Promotion Strategy, execute community-engaged research projects to investigate students' perceptions and experiences related to wellbeing. Student CHOs facilitate focus groups with no professional staff present to allow for participants to openly discuss lived experiences with their peers.

Community Health Organizers facilitated eight hour-long focus groups via Zoom in October 2020. Any person registered part- or full-time as a USC student in fall 2020 semester was eligible to participate. 42 students in total participated. Focus group size ranged from two – eight participants. The CHOs used a variety of online channels to recruit student participants. The recruitment graphic was posted on Slack channels, placed in e-newsletters of student-facing campus offices like residential education and cultural centers, and emailed to student organization leaders and academic advisors, requesting the material be

forwarded to students in their group or office. The recruitment graphic included a link and QR code which led to an online sign-up form where students could indicate which focus group date they were available to attend. CHOs sent an email confirmation to all student participants and provided a Zoom link to the online focus group. Two Community Health Organizers were present at each session, with one facilitating and one note-taking. All student participants were asked to use pseudonyms while speaking to protect anonymity. Focus group sessions were audio recorded after CHOs obtained permission from all participants. CHOs used a structured moderator guide to facilitate the conversation and maintain consistency across sessions. Each student received a $20 Amazon e-gift card for their participation.

Focus group audio was transcribed verbatim via an online transcription service. Two Community Health Organizers performed individual inductive open-coding on each transcript. After an initial round of discussion and comparison, each pair derived category codes from the data and counted frequencies for the associated responses. These category codes were then reviewed and revised by a professional staff member. After category codes were established, one student developed major and minor themes across all eight focus groups. Participant quotes were included in all steps of the analysis to provide nuance and illustrate findings.

FOCUS GROUP EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT

Dates: 10/1/2020, 10/2/2020, 10/5/2020, 10/6/2020, 10/7/2020 (2), 10/8/2020, 10/9/2020
Focus Group Facilitators: Joanne Lee, Lana Bridi, Zachary Dunn, Raveena Ghanshani, and Baktazh Azizi
Report Authors: Alejandra Barreto, Lana Bridi, Zachary Dunn, Amanda Vanni, and Andrea Moore
Number of Participants: 42
Participant Description: USC undergraduate and graduate students

Demographic Breakdown:

		Count	Percent*
Race/Ethnicity	Arab or Arab American	1	2.38%
	Asian or Asian American	20	47.62%
	Black or African American	5	11.90%
	Caucasian or White	10	23.81%
	Hispanic or Latino/a/x or Chicano/a/x	5	11.90%
	Middle Eastern	1	2.38%
	Other	2	4.76%
	South Asian or Desi American	6	14.29%

Sexual Orientation	Asexual	2	4.76%
	Bisexual	8	19.05%
	Gay	1	2.38%
	Heterosexual	26	61.90%
	Lesbian	1	2.38%
	Queer	3	7.14%
	Questioning	1	2.38%
Gender Identity	Female	33	78.57%
	Male	9	21.43%
Degree Program	Bachelor's	19	45.24%
	Master's	17	40.48%
	Other	1	2.38%
	PhD	5	11.90%
Year in Program	First	15	35.71%
	Second	15	35.71%
	Third	6	14.29%
	Fourth	5	11.90%
	Fifth	1	2.38%
Expected Graduation	2020	4	9.52%
	2021	11	26.19%
	2022	11	26.19%
	2023	9	21.43%
	2024	7	16.67%
International/Domestic	International	15	35.71%
	Domestic	27	64.29%
First Generation	Yes	14	33.33%

For additional questions, please contact:
USC Student Health - Office for Health Promotion Strategy, Backbone for the USC Well-being Collective at hpstrategy@usc.edu

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	No	28	66.67%
Registered with DSP	Yes	5	11.90%
	No	37	88.10%

*Sums of category percentages may exceed 100.00% due to participants' ability to select multiple responses

Research Questions:

1. Explore what contributes to sense of belonging in an online university setting
2. Identify what students see as their role in creating an inclusive campus community
3. Determine resources or support USC could offer to equip students to foster an inclusive campus community

Community Health Organizers, serving as focus group facilitators, explored a variety of concepts relating to belonging and inclusion at USC with their peers. Topics of discussion included students' definitions of sense of belonging, drivers of belonging, disparities in sense of belonging among different student groups, and the roles of students, faculty, and administrators in creating a more inclusive campus community. In order to gain an understanding of sense of belonging from students' perspectives, CHOs began the focus groups by asking students to share how they define belonging. Students primarily defined belonging as feeling like part of a supportive community where they are comfortable expressing themselves (34 times in all eight focus groups). As Mango described, it is *"where you can be yourself. You can say whatever you want to say and be whoever you want to be."* Many students (12 times in six of eight focus groups) highlighted that a supportive community involves reciprocal relationships, where students not only receive support, but also give it back to others. Further, some students described a supportive community as one in which they feel wanted and heard (nine times in three of eight focus groups). After hearing students' definitions, facilitators provided the following definition for sense of belonging: *"feeling welcomed, valued, and a part of a community."* CHOs asked student participants to reference this definition of belonging throughout the remainder of the discussion as a means to establish a consistent understanding across all focus groups.

FINDINGS:

Drivers of Belonging

Assertion #1: Belonging is created in both in-person and virtual spaces where students can connect with others who share the same identity or similar values.

Participants in the focus groups reported that their sense of belonging is related to their ability to connect with other peers who share the same identity or similar values. This can occur both in-person and in an online setting. When asked to define sense of belonging, participants described (seven times in three of eight focus groups) a supportive community in which people can relate to each other, either through shared experiences or values. As Pomegranate stated, "*a group of people who clicks with you, aligns with your values, kind of makes you feel like you're a part of something bigger than yourself.*" These themes were present in the experiences that participants shared when asked about a time when they felt like they belonged. For example, Mangosteen shared this experience: "*My fellow classmates and I were sitting in one of the lounges and we were doing assignments because they were due in four hours. And the shared experience really made me feel like it was something I was a part of. And even though it was not the most positive experience, it was still something that elicited great feelings at the end, because I knew that I wasn't alone.*" In Mangosteen's case, the students shared a common value of completing the assignment together, and that offered comfort, community, and a sense of belonging to them. Another example is from Pomegranate who recalled, "*the first scenario that came into my mind was mainly from last year when I was participating in the Korean American Student Association's 'Dance Off,' which is essentially just a whole bunch of us freshmen working towards all collectively as a team towards one goal for our end-of-year dance competition.*" Similar to Mangosteen's narrative, Pomegranate experienced sense of belonging because their group shared a common value and goal.

Many students described the importance of being with people who share their identity or values (21 times across four of eight focus groups.) As Mango mentioned, "*one time I felt like I belonged was in this discussion group where like Asian Americans… we just discuss issues in the API community. I felt like I belonged because we kind of all were sharing a bunch of similar experiences that we've faced. It was just like we all related to each other in a weird way, even though we never met before, but it just felt like we all had a connection.*" Another student shared they felt a strong sense of belonging through a program for low-income, first-generation students, recalling, "*knowing that there were different people who shared similar upbringings and similar struggles, really made a transition into a large university, campus a lot smoother. And I'm always [going to] be really grateful for programs like that.*" In contrast, some students noted the value of sharing experiences with a diverse group of people (three times in two of eight focus groups.) One student shared, "*I think [sense of belonging] has a connotation of homogeny [sic], but I think that it's not that everybody is the same, but everybody is comfortable with being completely themselves.*" Students' sentiments indicate that in order to foster a sense of belonging among students, the university can offer student spaces to convene based on shared values or identities. However, as participants noted during focus groups, it could be ineffective and even disruptive to instill the idea among students that sense of belonging can only be achieved in groups with a shared identity.

Barriers to Belonging

Assertion #2: The loss of physical interaction on campus and lack of facilitated interaction in digital spaces hinder students' ability to develop relationships and form community with their peers.

A majority of participants across all eight focus groups expressed that their sense of belonging has been negatively impacted in the online setting, as mentioned 103 times. Based on participants' responses, this decrease in sense of belonging can be attributed to barriers in the virtual space that hinder students' ability to foster community and relationships among their peers. More specifically, these barriers include a loss of in-person, physical interactions and a lack of meaningful interactions in the digital space. These responses covered issues and limitations associated with virtual peer-to-peer interactions, a loss of social opportunities from in-person settings, and first-year specific struggles with sense of belonging.

Participants discussed the superficiality of relationships in the digital space and their lack of depth 36 times among six of the eight focus groups. As Strawberry stated, *"everyone's just sitting alone on their screens... there's that huge gap of separation between you and those other people that makes it really hard to overcome those barriers for more genuine connections."* Banana echoed a similar thought, saying that *"people have their guard up in online settings."* It appears that communication and connection are strained in the virtual space and cannot mimic or replace authentic, organic in-person interactions that students were accustomed to before these digital spaces. As Plum summarized, *"Zoom calls are naturally pretty awkward."* When participants were prompted to offer reasons explaining the "awkward" nature of peer-to-peer interactions in a virtual space, many reported an increased difficulty in reading body language and other non-verbal cues during virtual interactions. Others reported that the structure of virtual communication platforms limits social interaction. For example, Watermelon discussed, *"in a Zoom call, only max two, three people can talk at the same time before it gets confusing... It naturally lends to some people being silenced almost."* These participants' responses indicate a need for improved and varied virtual communication platforms that can foster more organic interactions.

In addition to superficial relationships, students mentioned other barriers to sense of belonging including Zoom fatigue, lack of motivation, and lack of opportunities to "naturally socialize." Participants mentioned that staring at screens for large portions of the day can be discouraging and tiring, leading to a lack of motivation for peer-to-peer interactions in the digital space. In three of the eight focus groups, participants mentioned 11 times that the loss of in-person social opportunities led to a decrease in their sense of belonging. Passionfruit explained this concept in their example, *"What I think is really lacking online is being able to walk to your class and sit down five minutes before class starts and being able to strike a conversation with someone who is sitting next to you. That just does not really exist in Zoom classes at all. You log in, everyone's muted, nothing is happening. Those are the little bonds that you'll be making if we were in person [that we are missing]."* Missing opportunities for small talk and impromptu social interactions that lead to peer-to-peer connections are reasons that students feel their sense of belonging has decreased in the virtual environment.

Among these previous challenges, a few students (six times in three of eight focus groups) highlighted challenges specific to the online-classroom setting. Students felt they were not able to make genuine

connections with their peers and faculty. One student described that class feels like all work and no play, stating, *"when we usually work in groups in an in-person setting, we tend to crack jokes a bit and share things while we are working together. But when we are working in an online setting sometimes I feel like it's more to the point. It's more work-based."* Some also mentioned these feelings of disconnectedness translated to their student organization meetings. As Strawberry described, joining online club events has become "*much more intimidating.*" Whether because of Zoom fatigue, lack of motivation, or feeling intimated, student organizations have been experiencing low attendance in the online setting, as noted by Kiwi. This is an alarming trend since many students attribute their sense of belonging to student organizations (15 times in five of eight focus groups). Students' lack of participation in student organizations in the virtual setting is another possible explanation for decreased sense of belonging among students.

When asked about sense of belonging in the virtual setting, first-year students discussed unique difficulties they have been facing. Difficulties specific to freshmen were highlighted eight times among five of eight focus groups. Kiwi mentioned*, "I'm a freshman so I came to USC and I didn't really know anybody. Because classes are online, it still feels like I haven't met that many people which is definitely hard."* In articulating these challenges, students named the online setting as the primary barrier to establishing a sense of belonging during their crucial first year as college students. As Peach said, *"I think being a freshman colors the [university] experience a lot. I left high school and now there was this big void and occasionally chatting with lab group members about assignments is not a sense of community. I think that as someone who was starting from zero, it's been very slow going."* These discussions highlight the necessity of developing strategies specific to first-year students to improve their sense of belonging during an important time in their university careers.

While many students indicated their sense of belonging had decreased in a fully virtual semester, a significant portion of students (30 times in five of eight focus groups) reported an increase in sense of belonging. Students noted the shared experience of being online can foster bonding among peers. As Watermelon expressed, *"I've been really enjoying breakout rooms in my chem lab, which is really weird. Today I made a new friend in our chem lab, so we started a new group chat. That was fun."* Another student Cherry shared*, "during the pandemic I met some people online, and they're actually a Christian group in USC. They were holding a series of events to help international students and to mentor them. I was lucky to get into one of the groups. Then they were all super kind to me. They tried to check on me every week.*" Others noted that being online has increased the opportunities to socialize, and in some instances, has broken barriers such as the financial costs of attending events. Based on these students' experiences, one possible strategy to implement could be to create social events for students that emphasize and make use of the students' shared experience of being online together.

Inequities at USC

Assertion #3: **USC's structure, practices, and policies contribute to traditionally minoritized groups feeling less included in the campus culture.**

During the focus groups, students were presented with a graphic displaying sense of belonging of USC students disaggregated by race/ethnicity, domestic vs. international student status, sexuality, first generation student status, and students registered with USC's Disability Services and Programs. A large portion of students reported the data was aligned with their personal experiences and observations of being a student at USC (37 times in seven of eight focus groups.) As Strawberry stated, *"I feel like these results of the survey, kind of mimic how my impression was, that, there's this image of the typical USC student, and it makes me upset. Just like that it confirms who feels welcome…it's disappointing that first-generation or disabled students feel 10 or 20% less welcome than white students."* In addition to first generation students and students registered with USC's Disability Services and Programs (DSP), participants named international, Masters, and LGBTQ+ students as groups who struggled to find a sense of belonging. These students' reflections painted the "typical USC student" as White, American, undergraduate, wealthy, able-bodied, cisgender, and heterosexual, suggesting that students who don't hold these identities are more likely to feel excluded at USC.

When asked about the drivers of differences in sense of belonging, students primarily attributed the disparities to lack of representation and lack of acceptance and inclusion of diverse identities (33 times in seven of eight focus groups.) Participants stated that students among dominant identity groups with greater representation on campus experience a greater sense of comfort and belonging whereas students who hold traditionally marginalized identities must actively seek out an accepting community. One student, Starfruit, described a dominant identity as, *"in this case Asian students. Typically they find their groups better, they're more willing to speak out and they're more comfortable speaking out."* Another student, Mango, shared, *"As someone who is LGBTQ for example, I have to navigate which spaces I'm willing to share that identity with because there may be people who make me feel unsafe or will treat me differently for being part of queer community."* In addition to relaying the struggle of minoritized students to feel accepted by their peers, students also highlighted faculty members' behavior in the classroom as a possible driver of disparities in belonging. Guava stated that *"I actually emailed my professor because the microaggressions have just become too much for me."* Her experience demonstrates the role faculty can play in creating either a welcoming or hostile classroom environment. Another student, Peach, mentioned the impact of USC's history of exclusion on students' belonging, sharing, *"what USC has been about historically isn't something that it can really get away from super easily. And I think something that really stands out to me is, what is VKC, the Von KleinSmid name was just removed from that. But for me as a Jewish student, that was a little bit of a reminder of, oh, this place historically has not been for me. It has not existed to serve me, or people like me."* This student's reflection indicates an institution's history can be influential to sense of belonging.

The participants identified other specific barriers to sense of belonging 22 times among four of eight focus groups, calling attention to financial, language, and accessibility barriers as deterrents from belonging on campus. As Plum described, *"To join a lot of things at USC, you have to pay more, essentially, whether it be a club or organization, a sorority, like whatever it is. And I think that definitely*

creates a divide between students, because some people can do that, no problem, and other people, they may not have the ability to take part in that activity at that point." An international student focus group participant stated *that "I find it really hard to fit in with American students, because sometimes I can't understand them."* Another participant commented on the lack of inclusion for students with disabilities, saying, *"I also know that there's a lot of difficulty recruiting note takers for students who need those services."* Students' accounts of these disparities in belonging further affirm that if a students' identities do not match the perceived "typical USC student," they will encounter a less inclusive campus experience.

Roles in Creating Belonging

Assertion #4: Sense of belonging among students is bolstered by proactive, coordinated communication and efforts from faculty, staff, and students to create a caring and inclusive environment.

The participants asserted that students can foster sense of belonging by playing active roles in creating inclusive spaces. From making friends, to running student organizations, to campus activities and celebrations, students can take the initiative to build a more inclusive community. Being proactive in the creation of friendships emerged 90 times across all eight focus groups. As Banana described, *"You got to take initiative and maybe crack a joke here and there. You can even say, 'Hi, can I take a seat over here?' Introduce yourself. Something small. You got to go a little bit outside your comfort zone in order to communicate."* In six of eight focus groups (33 times), students reflected that student organizations play a significant role in either fostering or hindering sense of belonging. While student organizations can be a place for commonality, comradery, and community, exclusivity and recruitment bias can limit the sense of belonging engendered by student organizations. For example, Strawberry said, *"people throw around this term called culture fit…but I think that's such a weird umbrella term to use when you're trying to recruit new students because everyone grew up differently. And I think looking for a culture fit implies a certain type of person that you want in your organization, which I think tends to isolate a lot of potential great members."* Students recognized the major role student organizations play in belonging and called for the university to better support or reward student organizations which foster inclusion. Another theme that emerged from the focus groups was that students can increase sense of belonging by being advocates for each other. The role of being an advocate for others was mentioned 28 times in four of eight focus groups. As Strawberry mentioned*, "students need to speak up against microaggressions and other acts of discrimination, even if it's uncomfortable."* Another student, Nectarine, echoed this sentiment: *"I've definitely been in classes where my own identity has been debated, which is such an isolating experience. …we can start with protecting our peers when those instances do occur, instead of having the burden be entirely on them to defend themselves."* These findings demonstrate students possess the ability to improve belonging by standing up for their peers and taking action to ensure their personal relationships and organizational structures foster inclusion.

Focus groups participants also emphasized that USC faculty play critical roles in bolstering sense of belonging. Students frequently mentioned the importance of adjusting curricular policies and practices to enhance students' belonging (24 times in five of eight focus groups.) As one student expressed, *"I would feel more comfortable knowing that there are people working with our faculty to help them enhance their*

self-reflective practice that they are working out, whatever personal biases they may have so that it's not coming up in the classroom in the form of microaggression." Faculty's role in promoting online social connection emerged nine times. As Plantain shared, *"faculty play a huge role in building opportunities for students to socialize, especially in online settings."* Guava mentioned, *"having an unstructured, open space to talk at the beginning of online classes humanizes people and builds camaraderie."* In addition to faculty's role in enhancing peer-to-peer connections, students referenced the importance of improving USC accommodations. Pineapple highlighted struggles international students face, stating, *"international students taking exams at odd times is "ridiculous [and is] not setting them up for success."* Students detailed the need to revise testing accommodations, with special attention towards students in other time zones and those who may be living in disruptive environments. Students also voiced concerns about administrators' investment in addressing basic needs and students with disabilities. One student mentioned, *"USC doesn't do the best job of addressing basic needs, especially when it comes to access to food and shelter which is especially important right now in COVID. I would imagine it's hard for certain people who are lacking basic needs to feel included and be able to join in other activities to have a community if they're still stressed about their very basic needs."* Another student, Kiwi, talked about the need for mentorship opportunities for students with disabilities, suggesting, *"As a DSP student, I think it would be really interesting if there's a way to opt in to some sort of program where you could be placed with another student that has your same DSP status…I think that would be a cool way to just interact with people that really understand things that maybe other people wouldn't."* Students felt that a greater investment in campus accommodations would better support students who may be struggling to feel included.

Interestingly, the participants recognized the large number of resources on campus but noted the lack of student knowledge of said resources. Increasing the number and awareness of resources emerged 55 times across seven out of eight focus groups. These observations, in which students described a deficiency in resource dissemination, ties into an overall need for better communication and engagement between administration, faculty, and students (29 times across six of the eight focus groups). Students indicated that at USC, there are a lack of opportunities for students to voice their opinions on resources or support they need. As one student described, *"I think there still needs to be some more transparency, in terms of the details and how [administrators] communicate promptly with the students…especially in the wake of all the big change in the campus culture and core values."* Many students appreciated the opportunity to participate in a focus group and expressed the need for other similar open forums where students can be heard and work with USC's administration to make change. As one student stated, *"I think this right here is a great thing to do, just the fact that we're all sitting here and being heard in regards to our concerns."* Another echoed a similar statement, saying, *"it's good to have more spaces to talk about things that are personal and to talk about things that might be serious. Full disclosure, the last 45 minutes have been one of the better conversations I've had with other USC students about what does it feel like to be here right now? So I think that having more spaces where people can have those conversations…I think that could be really beneficial."* Students' desire for greater collaboration and communication between faculty, staff, and students reveals the need for more engagement opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Further enhance and invest in **campus resource offices/programs** that support students who hold **traditionally marginalized identities**
   - Examples include: students with disabilities, LGBTQ+, international, or Black-identifying students.

2. Highlight the value of **intersectional spaces** and bringing a diverse set of people together, focusing on shared values as opposed to identities.
   - Encourage **inter-RSO collaborations** and partnerships

3. Develop **intersectionality resources** and **events** from campus resource centers

4. Develop **resources** catered towards **first-year students** and their unique challenges with sense of belonging
   - Focus on small-group settings
     - Intentional mentorship programs
     - Equip RSOs with skills/support to cater resources toward first-year students

5. Equip faculty, staff and students leaders with the knowledge/skills to foster **social connection** in the classroom and extracurricular setting
   - Routinely incorporate **restorative practices**
     - Examples include: using icebreakers at the beginning of class or RSO meeting, undertaking microaggression training, etc.

6. Reorient and support **RSOs** to enhance their **inclusivity**
   - Expand the **USC Wellbeing Champions program**
   - Provide **incentives** or **rewards** to RSOs promoting sense of belonging

7. Reexamine policies around **RSO member recruitment**

8. Offer **improved** and **varied virtual communication platforms** for students, staff, and faculty beyond Zoom

9. Facilitate **bi-directional communication** between students and administrators
   - Example: town halls

10. Continue to offer a selection of engaging **virtual events** and **resources** in an **in-person** campus setting to **increase accessibility**