

I think it's crazy how I can count on my hand, at least the number of Black people. And then if we include the people who aren't mixed, there's only two of us. If I include the only African American, there's just me. I was like, wow, I've never been the only African American in an institution before.

Not being accepted by your peers it kind of leads to just distrust, it's like can I trust any peer whatsoever? And if you're not accepted there, where can you be accepted? It's just a sense of paranoia also, just if this group won't accept me it has a domino effect in your mind.

I think what they do offer is very helpful if you're willing to reach out for it, but some people have complained about it in the past. I know there are differing opinions on specifically mental health care...it's not adequate enough.



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THE GATTON
ACADEMY 
of Mathematics and Science

The Gatton Academy and
Student Sense of Belonging:

AN ASSESSMENT

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Methods

Data were collected using a mixed method approach which included a survey and focus group with 10 current seniors at Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science. The 10 students were split into two focus groups of five. During the focus group, students were first given a five-item survey to complete before the focus group began. Students were asked the following questions:



1. What does having a sense of belonging look like to you?
2. What do you think are the effects of a student not feeling a sense of belonging?
3. What do you think are the effects of a student not feeling accepted by their peers?
4. What are some reasons you feel like you do belong in the Gatton Academy?
5. List 3-5 reasons why you feel or do not feel a sense of belonging here at Gatton Academy.
6. What are some ways, if any, you feel separated from your peers in the Gatton Academy?
7. How does your nationality or ethnic background factor in to how comfortable you are with peers and staff at the Gatton Academy?
8. What changes should Gatton Academy make to aid in a student's sense of belonging?
9. What changes should the staff at the Gatton Academy make to help students feel like they belong in the Gatton Community?

Key Findings

Two major themes were that the institutional structure and the social culture formed make it difficult for students to maintain a sense of belonging, which makes students feel isolated, anxious, and potentially leave the Academy.

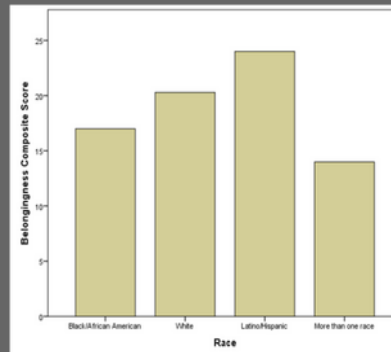
The participants generally agreed that there is a sense of belonging within small groups, but not a sense of belonging as a whole community.

The participants expressed much of their sense of belongingness is based on having similar academic interests.

The participants stated that everyone at Gatton embraces what little diversity they have and usually everyone is accepting. However, there is some idea that there are heavy diversity issues due to the lack of diversity within the academy population.

The participants mentioned that staff need more counseling training to better assist the students with real life problems and not just academic issues.

Sense of belonging by race



Recommendations

These focus groups provided many valuable perspectives of the sense of belonging at Gatton Academy.

The data gathered shows that the Gatton students have various opinions about why they do or do not belong in their living learning community. However, major themes such as academic competition, lack of diversity, the formation of small social cliques, the physical set-up of living accommodations, and the need for an increase in helping skills became evident when looking at why students do not feel that they belong. Based on the discussions that arose out of the focus group assessment, recommendations can be made to increase the sense of belonging at the Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science.

1. Further investigate sense of belonging and its ties to race and ethnicity
2. Assess sense of belonging annually
3. Conduct more training and offer professional development opportunities to staff
4. Encourage more interaction between students and staff
5. Establish a mentor program between juniors and seniors
5. Increase in-residential programming

How you connect with people matters. There are definitely barriers of race, religion, and competition.