The Student Experience: Sense of Belonging Across Time (WISHES)

Introduction and Methodology

The Wellbeing Improvement Survey for Higher Education Settings (WISHES) has been administered to the Texas A&M University student body in College Station since the 2021-2022 academic year. Texas A&M University surveyed the student body to better understand students' overall well-being, intermediate outcomes, educational outcomes, and student experiences that influence wellbeing. The survey covered topics such as overall health, psychological distress, suffering or struggling, flourishing, belonging at Texas A&M, resilience, binge drinking, health and academic risks, engagement in extracurricular activities, having a friend, mentor, or professor who makes them excited about learning and cares for them. The WISHES survey is administered in October, November, February, March, and April of each academic year. In the 2021-2022 academic year, the survey was also administered in September to students living on campus. However, the March and April surveys scheduled for spring 2023 were not administered. Since the 2021-2022 academic year, 20,360 students responded to at least one question, yielding an overall response rate of 12%.

This report focuses on how sense of belonging changes from year to year among students who have taken the survey in multiple years (n = 1088). The first time a student took the survey is referred to as Year 1, regardless of whether that was in 2021-22 or 2022-23; responses from the following year are referred to as Year 2. The amount of time between year 1 and year 2 varies depending on which month students took the survey in during those years, but they are always consecutive academic years. Sense of belonging was measured using a 7-point Likert scale item (strongly agree to strongly disagree) that read, "I belong at Texas A&M University." First-generation status was determined by student records. Undergraduate and graduate student responses were included in all analyses.

Changes in Sense of Belonging Across Time

A mixed ANOVA was used to assess changes in sense of belonging for first-generation and non-first-generation students from year 1 to year 2. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, first-generation students reported a slightly lower sense of belonging on average compared to their non-first-generation peers, but this difference did not quite reach statistical significance ($F(1, 1086) = 3.59$, $p = .058$). On average, sense of belonging did not significantly improve from year 1 to year 2 ($F(1, 1086) = 3.42$, $p = .065$). In fact, if anything, sense of belonging seems to be worsening for first-generation students across time, but this interaction effect was not statistically significant ($F(1, 1086) = 1.36$, $p = .244$). An independent samples t test performed after the fact indicated that the difference in sense of belonging between first-generation and non-first-generation students at year 2 was statistically significant but small ($t(1086) = 2.13$, $p = .034$, $d = .16$).
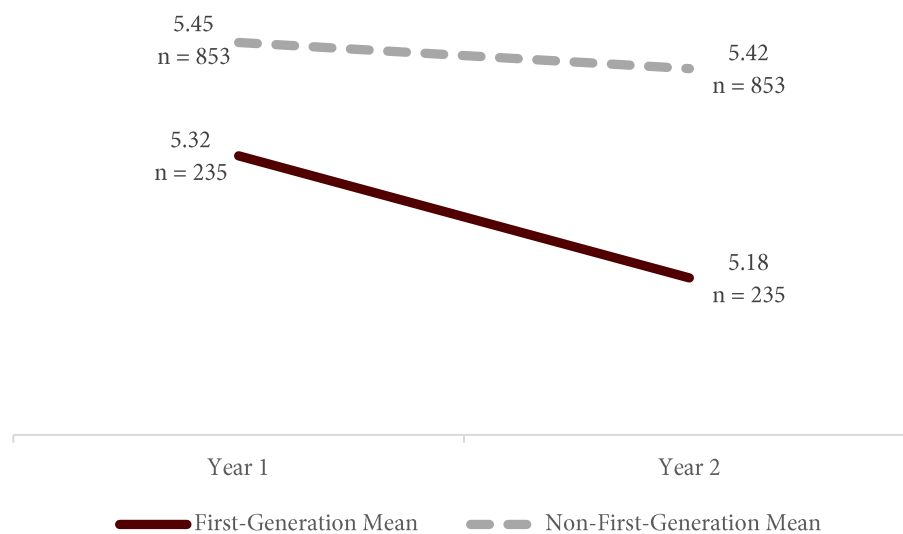

Figure 1. Mean sense of belonging response.

Conclusion

Sense of belonging at Texas A&M University does not appear to be increasing across time for students who have taken the WISHES survey multiple times. If anything, sense of belonging may be decreasing slightly across time for first-generation students specifically. Although this effect is small at the moment, if it continues beyond year 2 it may compound and become larger and more meaningful. Non-first-generation students do not appear to face this problem. Overall, when looking at all WISHES responses, 58% of

students (52% of first-generation and 60% of non-first-generation) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel they belong at Texas A&M University; this means that a substantial portion of the student body, particularly among first-generation students, only somewhat agree, are ambivalent, or disagree in some capacity that they belong at Texas A&M, and this sentiment either stays the same or potentially worsens slightly across time. Additional analyses not reported here indicate that sense of belonging is a potent predictor of outcomes such as psychological distress, flourishing, and academic risk both within the same semester and into the following academic year.

For more information, please contact wishes@tamu.edu.