

# Sense of Belonging Across Major Status at The University of Texas at Austin

## Sense of Belonging & Why it Matters

Sense of belonging is **“the sense that members of a community feel that they belong and that they matter to one another”** (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012, p. 484).

Sense of belonging is a subjective measurement reported by individuals (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). It is different from measures of integration such as how involved a student is on campus (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Not all involvements on campus make students feel like they belong; measuring sense of belonging is important because it can reveal “which forms of social interaction (academic and social) further enhance students’ affiliation and identity with their colleges” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 328).

**Sense of belonging has important implications for student success. Students that report a stronger sense of belonging are more committed to their institutions, are more likely to be retained, and are more likely to persist to graduation** (Hausmann et al., 2007; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; O’Keeffe, 2013; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015).

Sense of belonging is not well-studied in the research literature; in light of its observed importance in a number of studies, the concept needs to be further explored (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012).

## Our Comparison: Declared v. Undeclared Majors

Studies have found differences in graduation rates, self-concept and motivation for choosing a major between students in declared majors and students who are undeclared. Research has largely discussed these differences in relation to persistence and retention, for which sense of belonging also has strong implications. The literature has noted that other factors — including race, gender, faculty contact and access to univer-

sity resources — may influence differences in persistence and retention between these two groups (Leppel, 2001; Reiner, 2012; St. John, Hu, Simmons, Carter & Weber, 2004). Additionally, commitment to education and motivation for choosing a major have been found to differentially affect persistence among students based on whether or not they have a declared major (Leppel, 2001; Soria & Stebleton, 2013).

## Our Data: The SERU Survey

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey is administered to SERU Consortium members like UT Austin each year, and it is designed to capture curricular and co-curricular student engagement data (UC Regents, n.d.).

We analyzed undergraduate responses to **three questions** collected at UT in Fall 2015/Spring 2016: *“I feel like I belong at UT Austin”* (n=5098

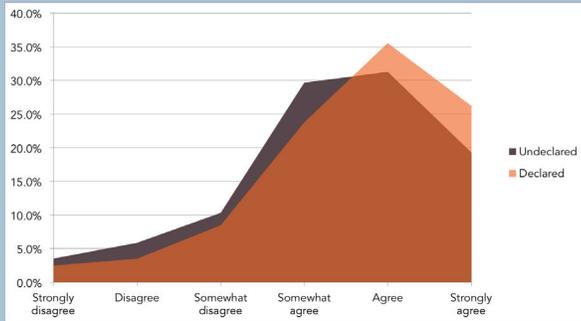
declared, n=425 undeclared); *“I am proud to be a student at this campus”* (n=1231 declared, n=109 undeclared); and *“Please select the statement that most closely describes your sense of affiliation with UT”* (n=1237 declared, 100 undeclared). These questions are very similar to questions asked in Bollen & Hoyle’s (1990) Sense of Belonging subscale, used by Hausmann et al. (2007), and to Hurtado & Carter’s (1997) study.

## Our Research Question

*How does sense of belonging differ between students who are declared majors and students who are undeclared majors at The University of Texas at Austin?*

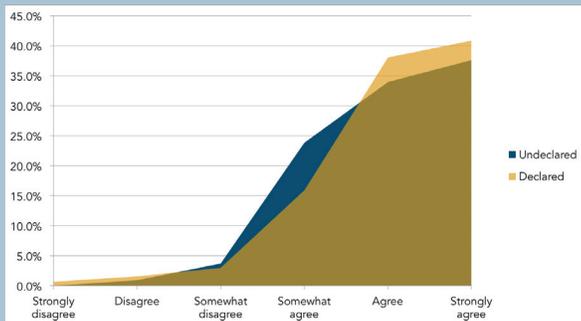
## Our Results

### I Feel that I Belong at UT Austin



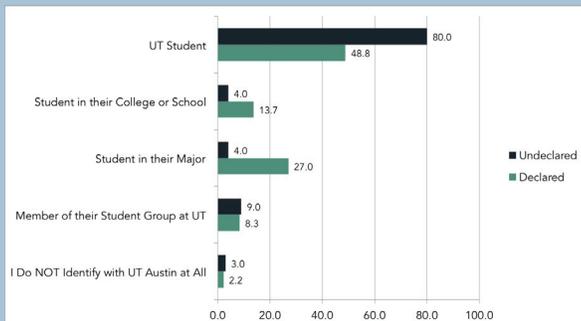
In our most direct measure, Undeclared students' responses are clustered around *somewhat agree*, while Declared students are clustered around *agree* and *strongly agree*, highlighting a weaker sense of belonging for Undeclared students.

### I am Proud to be a Student at This Campus



Undeclared students' responses are again clustered around *somewhat agree*, while Declared students are clustered around *agree* and *strongly agree*, showing Declared students' stronger sense of pride/institutional commitment.

### Percentage of Students Identifying Most Strongly as...



Despite the differences in the graphs above, neither Declared nor Undeclared students show high rates of *not affiliating with UT at all*. As might be expected, the difference manifests itself in where the students' institutional affiliations lie.

## Conclusions & Takeaways

**Students that report a stronger sense of belonging are more committed to their institutions, are more likely to be retained, and are more likely to persist to graduation** (Hausmann et al., 2007; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; O'Keeffe, 2013; Soria & Stubblefield, 2015).

**The literature on undeclared v. declared college students suggests that undeclared students may have a variety of contributing factors that may put them at a disadvantage for persisting in their educational goals.** This supports our choice to explore whether sense of belonging differs between these two groups.

**Our data indicate an appreciable difference in sense of belonging and related proxies when comparing students with declared and undeclared majors at The University of Texas at Austin.**

**Further research should investigate sense of belonging over time and in comparison with other institutions, as well as possible interventions that may effectively increase students' sense of belonging.** Research suggests it is important to measure sense of belonging as a variable discrete from measures of integration (Hausmann et al., 2007; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Soria & Stubblefield, 2013).

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