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Post-secondary students with disabilities share stories of belonging

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Post-secondary students with disabilities share stories of belonging

by

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Abstract
This study examined a sense of belonging as integral to inclusion for students with disabilities within a post-secondary context. Grounded in a critical disability lens, coupled with identity theories, a narrative research approach was used. Nine students with disabilities from a small, Canadian, rural college shared stories of belonging and of the significance they ascribe to belonging in their overall post-secondary experience. Three prominent themes, narratives of becoming a student, narratives of engagement and narratives of barriers to belonging were uncovered. Narratives of becoming a student relate to the development of a student identity and its reciprocal relationship to the development of a sense of belonging. Narratives of engagement capture the positive and/or negative interactions of students with faculty and peers and the impact on belongingness. Narratives of barriers to belonging highlight the environmental, physical, systemic and attitudinal obstacles encountered by students. Analyzing narrative accounts through critical disability and identity frameworks revealed in-depth understandings of students’ belonging experiences. Results of this study offer both theoretical and practical implications for institutions to consider in their commitment to cultivating belonging-centred campuses. Further, I suggest including disability as part of institutional diversity and also the use of a multifaceted critical lens of identity and disability in which to view stories of belonging.
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Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the students who participated in this study. I am deeply honoured that you shared your stories with me.
Dedication

I dedicate this work to all students with disabilities.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

“I think a big thing of a sense of belonging is just being comfortable and feeling included...” (Margarite)

Students with disabilities share stories of a sense of belonging and ascribe meaning to belonging experiences in their post-secondary lives. In this inquiry, I am interested in a more comprehensive understanding of belonging for this post-secondary student population. A sense of belonging is a critical component of inclusivity and may not always be addressed in post-secondary policy and practice. In this study, I examined a sense of belonging as integral to inclusion, rather than looking at the technical and procedural components of inclusion, such as academic accommodations.

In this introductory chapter, I provide the background, research context, purpose, rationale, and significance of this project. I will then define terminology and key concepts. In chapter 2, I present the theoretical constructs that informed all aspects of this research project. Chapter 3 is a review of historical turns and changes for disabled people and an examination of the literature related to belonging, especially in the post-secondary context. I discuss the research design of the study, the methodological approach, selection of participants, data collection, analysis of data and study rigor in Chapter 4. In chapter 5, I present the findings of the data followed by a discussion and detailed analysis of the findings in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 explores research limitations. Lastly, Chapter 8 outlines implications for practice, knowledge translation and recommendations for future research.

Background

It has long been argued that a sense of belonging is an essential human need (Maslow, 1970), which contributes to self-esteem and a positive identity (Erikson, 1968). In the post-
secondary environment, a sense of belonging has been linked to academic motivation, improved learning outcomes, and retention (Freeman, Anderman & Jenson, 2007; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002, Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). Experiencing a sense of belonging has been noted as particularly challenging for students from a historically marginalized background (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas, Vaquera, & Zehr, 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Students with disabilities come from a historically marginalized social identity group, and yet we know very little about their post-secondary experiences of belonging, especially in Canadian colleges and universities.

There is a need for more work in this area to gain deeper insights of belonging from the rarely heard voices of disabled students. In this study, I chose a narrative research approach to examine students’ stories of belonging. The theoretical framework of critical disability theory and identity theories informed the study questions, literature review, methodology, interview questions, and analysis and interpretation of stories while attending to the significance ascribed to belonging within the students’ post-secondary lives.

Increasingly, students with disabilities are entering colleges and universities (e.g., Hadjikakou, Polycarpou, & Hadjilia, 2010; Lombardi & Murray, 2011; Kim & Aquino, 2017; Reed, Lund-Lucas, & O’Rourke, 2003; Scott, McGuire, & Shaw, 2003). This may be due in part to government legislation and policy addressing non-discrimination (e.g., Goode, 2007; Hadjikakou et al. 2010; Hadjikakou & Hartas, 2008). In the Canadian educational system, it is the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and provincial human rights legislation that guide accessible learning policy in post-secondary institutions (Hutchinson, 2010 as cited in Deluca, 2013, p. 307). Hibbs and Pothier (2006) informed that academic accommodations in post-secondary “exist so that universities meet their legal obligations not to discriminate under human
rights legislation or the equality provisions in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (p. 195). Hibbs and Pothier (2006) further noted that institutions may use language that implies accessible values and assumptions, when in reality students are not experiencing a sense of equality. Even when reasonable academic accommodations are in place, students with disabilities may not be fully included in the classroom and on campus.

Institutions, while adhering to legislative mandates regarding physical access and academic instruction, may neglect the social supports and social integration necessary for students to feel like they belong. Recent literature illuminates that both academic and social integration are significant. Leake and Stodden (2014) noted, “reflected in having a sense of “belonging” on campus, [academic and social integration] are key factors for student success.” (p. 399). It is “critical for colleges and universities to establish a campus that is “barrier-free and welcoming – a place where disability is not seen as a marker of membership in a “special” group virtually nobody wants to be a part of but is, rather, accepting and appreciated as an element in a valued range of diversity.” (Leake & Stodden, 2014, p. 399).

Dunn (2006) stated that, “Inclusive post-secondary education is becoming an increasing priority in Canada, but there is little policy to support it” (p. 427). Approximately 65% of working-age individuals with a disability have not completed post-secondary and “many individuals confront multiple problems being integrated into the educational system.” (p. 413). Post-secondary education is becoming more necessary in order to reduce economic barriers and institutional practices need to support inclusivity, specifically social inclusion, in order to promote learning success.

Goodley (2011) acknowledged this need of advancing institutional inclusivity in his
exploration of possibilities and challenges in education. Goodley noted that although more students with a disability are entering post-secondary education, there are still questions as to the extent with which these students belong. Goodley specified that rather than “fixing” a person with a disability, the focus should be on changing the context to one that promotes belonging. The responsibility of providing support to students with disabilities rests not only with disability service practitioners but also with post-secondary administrative leaders who can enact structural, environmental, and policy change (Kim & Aquino, 2017). Faculty also need to engage in more inclusive pedagogy, such as universal design for learning, which enhances access by removing exclusionary barriers through curricula accommodations; for example, untimed tests (Lombardi & Murray, 2011).

Traditionally, Canadian post-secondary institution policy for students with disabilities has been based on a biomedical approach. A biomedical approach incorporates impairment as biologically situated within the individual (e.g., Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999; Gabel 2005; Goodley, 2011; Oliver, 1996). Therefore, thinking, practices, and discourse are underpinned by assessing for deficits, defining people by categorical labels, and pathologizing the conditions related to the label of disability. In Canadian post-secondary institutions, any necessary academic, physical, and informational (textbooks) accommodations are offered to eligible students who provide supporting medical documentation to the disability service office. It is not clear whether these technical accommodations enhance the experience of a sense of belonging.

I am employed as a disability service coordinator at a rural college in western Canada. From here forward, this post-secondary institution will be referred to as “the College”. At the time of this project, I had been working as a disability service coordinator for 16 years. In my
role at the College, I provide academic accommodations and accessibility planning to students with disabilities to reduce and/or remove barriers to learning. Similar to other Canadian colleges and universities, the College is formally committed to educational inclusion and within its Mission states a Value of Inclusivity - "a belief in providing a welcoming, supportive institution that celebrates diverse perspectives, cultures, traditions, and ways of learning and knowing".

The number of students with disabilities registered with the Disability Services Office on the main campus of the College has steadily increased over the years. For example, in 2012, 90 students with disabilities received service. By 2016, when the participants in this study were interviewed, the number of registered students with disabilities on the main campus had grown to 184 students. This statistic of 184 disabled students represents 14% of the 1,326 total student population on campus.

Through the course of my work at the College, I realized that a bio-medical approach to disability does not promote inclusivity. Students with disabilities are required to be assessed by medical professionals to receive service and academic accommodations, which, from the start of their post-secondary journey, sets them apart from the rest of the student body. In the College environment, I have heard many comments that give reason for concern. For example, one instructor in the business program expressed that his students were not interested in working in a group with a student with a disability. The instructor remarked that his other students enrolled in a business course, not in “an abnormal psychology course”. Other faculty at the College have described students with disabilities as a “burden”, indicated that they “have enough of those students” in their class, and expressed that “these students won’t be wanted in the workplace”. This discourse obstructs, rather than promotes, inclusion and belonging.
It is my belief that academic organizations not only have a professional obligation, but also a social and moral obligation, to foster a genuinely inclusive campus climate. I questioned if and how the policies, practices, and dialogue in a post-secondary context reflect a valuation of difference and contribute to creating an inclusive educational context that promotes a sense of belonging. This issue, and my own experience, led me to consider whether a stated value of inclusivity translates into experiencing a sense of belonging in an accepting educational environment for students with disabilities.

The voices of college and university students with disabilities are not often presented in scholarly work. This gap in the literature, and my own experience with faculty and students, led to the desire to examine a sense of belonging in this population of learners. The College was the site of this research project and all participants were students with disabilities attending the College.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to contribute to an understanding of the belonging experiences of post-secondary students with disabilities. To achieve the purpose of the study, I asked two questions:

1. What stories do students with disabilities tell about a sense of belonging within the post-secondary context?
2. What do students with disabilities say about the significance of a sense of belonging in their overall post-secondary experience?

The qualitative nature of this study provided deep insights into the post-secondary belonging experiences of students with disabilities. The voices of the participants offer a rich, comprehensive understanding of belonging for this student population. Through this
understanding, faculty, administrators, and resource professionals can engage in creating meaningful belonging opportunities in the classroom and on a broader level on campus.

Rationale

Since we know very little about the topic of belonging for students with disabilities, it is intended that this study will increase awareness and serve to inform institutional policy and practice. Adding the voices of students with disabilities to the literature advances our understanding of belonging and has the potential to create a shift in institutional narratives. I anticipate that the findings, interpretations, and recommendations from this study will be transferable and valued by institutional leaders for its impact on inclusivity and belonging. Institutional leaders are interested in student retention and, as indicated earlier, a sense of belonging is becoming more recognized as a factor contributing to academic motivation, improved learning and retention.

This work will also enhance my own practice as a post-secondary disability service coordinator and contribute to the knowledge base of the field of disability service practitioners. New, in-depth knowledge can affect policy and program implementation for meaningful belonging opportunities on campus.

Definition of Terms

There are a number of specific terms that require definition to aid in a common understanding of current language. The terms used throughout this dissertation and their meanings are listed below:

1. **Student with a disability**: Describes a student who has been diagnosed with a disability in the category of mental or chronic health, physical, sensory, or learning disability and is academically eligible to attend a post-secondary institution. Canadian colleges and universities
require students to self-disclose and to provide medical documentation of a diagnosis from a physician, specialist and/or psychologist to receive academic accommodations. The Canadian government policy is to use person first language. However, Titchkosky (2001) informed that person first language carries a normalizing potential. There are individuals who do not want to disconnect the disability from the self. I acknowledge these different perspectives and have chosen to more frequently use the term “students with disabilities” rather then “disabled student” as the former is more prevalent the field of post-secondary disability services.

2. **Academically eligible student:** This term refers to a student who has met the admission requirements for a post-secondary program.

3. **Inclusivity/Inclusion:** Inclusivity will be used throughout this paper, as it is the term selected for the College mission statement. ‘Inclusivity’ will be used interchangeably with the term ‘inclusion’ and refers to the beliefs, attitudes, and practices that allow students to feel included, welcomed, and respected. Inclusive practices promote participation and engagement. Full inclusion, in the social/educational context, encompasses a sense of belonging, a sense of being valued (Deluca, 2013; Goodley, 2011; Rex, 2000; Strayhorn, 2012).

4. **Disability:** The definition of disability currently adopted by the Canadian government and the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada is consistent with the World Health Organization, The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) which describes disability as an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. “Disability emerges when physical, societal, and/or attitudinal, learning barriers are present that restrict a person’s way of thinking, moving, learning, engaging, interacting with others and with the environment. Disability is the interaction between individuals with a health condition (e.g. cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and depression) and
personal and environmental factors (e.g. negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social supports).” (WHO Fact Sheet, 2018).

5. **Impairment:** Impairment is a physical, cognitive, or sensory loss/limitation a person may experience.

6. **Ableism:** Ableism refers to the process that discriminates against any person that varies from the bio-cultural view of what is regarded as normal (Davis, 2002). Wolbring (2008b) wrote that ableism is a “set of beliefs, processes, and practices that produce - based on abilities one exhibits or values - a particular understanding of oneself, one’s body and one’s relationship with others of humanity, other species and the environment, and includes how one is judged by others” (p. 253). Perceiving certain abilities as essential (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012), ableism reduces the social standing of a person with a disability, therefore reducing their power, influence, value, and belonging in society.

7. **Belonging:** Belonging, in the post-secondary context, refers to a sense of being part of a group where the individual feels membership, feels accepted, respected, and feels they can contribute to school culture (Deluca, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). A sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, feeling connected, valued and cared about, feeling secure, and having opportunity for social participation (Rex, 2000; Strayhorn, 2012). Belonging is integral to inclusion in post-secondary education (Titchkosky, 2011). Mahar, Cobigo, and Stuart (2013) emphasized that belonging reflects a feeling of fitting in and may be influenced by “systemic barriers that inhibit an individual from feeling they can belong” (p. 21).

8. **Academic accommodation:** This term refers to the planned services, adaptations, and/or adjustments that enable students with disabilities to receive course materials, to participate in course activities, or to demonstrate mastery of course content and skills.
9. Adult education/post-secondary/higher education: There are different understandings of these terms, although they may be used interchangeably by some. Adult education refers to any curriculum based program for adults. Post-secondary refers to college and university programs and is the term mainly used in North America. Higher education is a term more widely used in European and countries outside of North America but can also be found in the Canadian literature.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I provided the background, research context, purpose, rationale, and significance of this project. I also defined terminology and key concepts used throughout this dissertation. This study sought a more comprehensive understanding of belonging for students with disabilities. Knowledge of belonging experiences, through listening to student voices, provides resource professionals, faculty, and administrators with direction to re-imagine disability in their colleges and universities, to engage in supportive belonging practices, and to become a belonging-centred institution.
Chapter 2 Theoretical Orientation, Conceptual Frameworks, Researcher Assumptions

In this chapter, I will review the philosophical assumption of social constructivism and the conceptual frameworks that guided the study’s questions, literature review, methods, and analysis. Finally, given these foundations, I will list the researcher assumptions which informed the development of the interview questions.

Theoretical Orientation

Social constructivist paradigm

Ontologically, I align with the philosophical assumption that knowledge/reality is multiple and varied and based on the subjective perceptions of each individual. In this inquiry, I am interested in understanding how students with disabilities perceive a sense of belonging in relation to their experiences as a post-secondary student.

Viewed through the constructivist paradigm, social reality is co-created by understanding the meaning of subjective experience (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Creswell, 2013). That is, reality is created through meaning making activities of community and individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Gergen (1999) explained that all knowledge or meaningful reality depends upon human practices and relationships that are developed within an interactional social context. From the constructivist worldview, an individual's identity is formed through various experiences and social interactions.

Constructivists are interested in how individuals construct meaning of their experiences. I am interested in the participants’ subjective experiences as the main source of data and I adopted this paradigm in social science research to deepen my understanding through critical reflection and interpretation of student stories. When trying to understand the challenges that some individuals face, this approach to examining belonging for disabled students allows the
researcher to be engaged in the co-construction of meaning gleaned through the participants’ stories. Viewing disability as a socially constructed phenomenon led me to question how students with disabilities perceive themselves, how they believe they have been constructed or known on campus, and how these perceptions impact belonging.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

I will introduce the conceptual frameworks of critical disability theory, Erikson’s identity theory, multiple identity theory and intersectionality. I drew from each of these frameworks, in an interwoven manner, as a lens in which to analyze student stories.

**Critical disability theory.**

I will begin with describing my choice of critical disability theory (CDT) as a framework in which to inform this study before describing CDT in detail.

I came to this research project as an undergraduate and graduate level trained speech-language pathologist, entrenched deeply within the medical model of disability. The therapeutic work I undertook was focused on deficit and on methods to rehabilitate clients to ‘normalcy’. Thus, my skills and background transferred seamlessly to my work as a disability service coordinator because embedded within the College was medically-driven attitudes, policy and practice for students with disabilities.

I continued to work within the medical model at the College for many years. Over time, I observed numerous students on my caseload being subjected to stigma, discrimination and oppressive practices, despite the fact that the institution was providing legally mandated physical and academic access. Through colleagues from other institutions, I learned of an alternative model in which to perceive disability; the social model. I then learned of the application of Universal Design to education. Knowing that the Disability Service Office could serve as a
catalyst for institutional change, and knowing that personally I was ready again for formal
learning, I pursued further education through this program at the University of Calgary.

It was through this doctoral program that I was introduced to critical disability theory
(CDT). CDT, for me, was a dramatic and welcome departure from the medical model to
perceiving the construct of disability. As I continued to learn about CDT and to become a more
critical thinker, I realized that CDT could serve as a theoretical basis to shape the work of the
Disability Service Office, faculty and administrators. As I progressed through the program, I
narrowed my research focus to belonging experiences and to exploring my assumption that
student success is influenced by a sense of belonging. I felt that applying a critical lens to this
study would garner results that could lead to fundamental institutional change because CDT
allows for a more complex, nuanced way of understanding student experiences and allows for a
more comprehensive practice to serving students.

CDT emerged from disability scholars critiquing existing disability theories, such as the
medical model and social model of disability (Evans, Broido, Brown & Wilke; 2017). As
previously stated, the medical model of disability frames disability as deficit (Barnes, Mercer, &
Shakespeare, 1999; Gabel 2005; Goodley, 2011; Hosking, 2008; Oliver, 1996) and identifies an
impairment of mind or body as a “problem” to be fixed. The medical model of disability leads to
a binary conceptualization of “normal” versus “other” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

Beginning in the 1970s, disabled scholars and activist challenged the stigmatization
associated with the medical model and the medicalizing of the identities of people with a
disability through advancement of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1996). The social
model argues that “the social disadvantage experienced by disabled people is caused by the
physical, institutional and attitudinal (together, the ‘social’) environment which fails to meet the
needs of people who do not match the social expectation of ‘normalcy’ (Hosking, 2008; p. 7). The social model further explains that it is the socially constructed environment that “disables” individuals with impairment and thus reduces their opportunity to equally participate in society (Barnes, 2004; Hiranandani, 2005; Hosking, 2008; Oliver, 1996; Titchkosky, 2003).

While the social model served to shift the focus of disability from the individual to society and from charity to rights, some disability scholars questioned the perceived hegemony of this model arguing that the oppression of people with disabilities is not solely due to structural barriers of society (Evans et al., 2017). In an effort to gain a more complex understanding of disability, scholars drew from critical social theory in their critique of the social model (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Critical social theory is associated with the institute for social research in Frankfurt Germany, known as the Frankfurt school and is “a group of approaches to the study of society” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 51). Critical social theory, incorporating a reflective assessment in its analysis of social processes, maintains a focus on individual emancipation and autonomy.

Applying a critical perspective to the social model, CDT emerged as a new framework in which to conceptualize disability. While CDT encompasses elements of the social model of disability, it expands beyond the social model in recognition of the personal experience of impairment and illness. As with the social model, CDT challenges the medical emphasis of disability, which perpetuates societal norms and biases against people with disabilities and attempts to dismantle normative assumptions and binary thinking, (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002; Davis, 2002; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). CDT argues that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a phenomenon intrinsic to the individual and is complex in
its “interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment and the social environment…” (Hosking, 2008; p. 7).

Beyond the social model, CDT offers a more comprehensive, holistic paradigm, one in which attends to disabling societal barriers and the effects of impairment (Evans et al., 2017). Since CDT does not isolate impairment, it values the total disability experience. Further, in considering the complexity of disabled students’ lives, CDT recognizes that disability is intersectional (Evans et al., 2017; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). That is, there is an interlocking relationship between disability and other social identity categories such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and ethnicity, which shape the disability experience (Hosking, 2008).

It is only recently that CDT has been found in the post-secondary literature (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Pena, Stapleton & Schaffer, 2016; Vacarro, Kimball, Wells & Ostiguy, 2015) where it has been useful in critically interrogating social and structural barriers within institutions while paying attention to the lived experience of students with disabilities. Within a post-secondary institution, CDT can be an effective framework for examining how institutional policies, practices, language, and attitudes “disable” students with impairments and affect belonging experiences.

Pothier and Devlin (2006), critical disability theorists and Canadian lawyers, argued that “disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion, it is a question of politics and power(lessness), power over and power to” (p.2). Hibbs and Pothier (2006) advocate for the use of critical disability theory in higher education to raise questions about belonging because, although disability is recognized as a human rights issue, in reality, individuals with disabilities are not necessarily treated equitably.
In their critical examination of supports for disabled students at a Canadian university, Hibbs and Pothier (2006) addressed the fact that, although institutions provide academic accommodations to level the playing field, these modifications “can fall short of achieving equity” (p.195). Approaching belonging for students with disabilities within a CDT framework highlights equity as well as equality. Equality, or treating everyone the same, allows for equal rights, equal status, and equal opportunity. Equity involves treating someone differently in order to be fair, to give the disabled student parity with their non-disabled peers.

In its critique of power imbalances and societal norms regarding disability, CDT challenges ableism and uses the voice of the disabled person to examine societal practices. While CDT provides a strong theoretical framework for this study, I chose to couple CDT with identity theories to further anchor the study.

**Identity theories: Erikson’s theory / Multiple identities / Intersectionality.**

This study was also informed by various identity theories to deepen an understanding of the participants’ post-secondary belonging experiences. Erikson’s (1968) theory of identity, which describes a core personal identity and a social identity, provided a useful foundation in understanding identity as socially constructed, iterative, and dynamic. Erikson argued that identity is contextually based and considers one’s history. Drawing from this theory, historical elements were brought into the interview questions and I paid attention to the students’ stories of high school belonging.

Erikson’s theory postulates that a strong identity can be developed when a person feels part of a group with a common set of values and when a person feels their own sense of self within this group. The person's ability to negotiate their membership within a group means their identity is open to change and adaptation. Analyzing how students with disabilities negotiate
their identity as a learner within the context of membership in a post-secondary student group can enhance our overall understanding of their sense of belonging. Erikson’s identity framework and assumptions associated with the basic human need of belonging offer conceptual understanding to the focus that guided the interview questions and interpretation of data in this study.

While Erikson’s theory highlights the significance of interactions with others and that belonging impacts identity, it does not recognize the multiple identities that individuals hold. Thus, I drew from multiple identity theory and the more recent theoretical framework of intersectionality to deepen an understanding of belonging for post-secondary students with disabilities.

Within social science, there is a burgeoning interest in the concept of a multi-dimensional identity (Jones & McEwan, 2000; Riddell, Tinklin, & Wilson, 2005; Strayhorn, 2012). This theory recognizes temporal and contextual changes in identity in addition to other social identity groups such as race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender and sexual orientation (Jones & McEwan, 2000).

The concept of multiple identities is integral to the theory of intersectionality, which further informed this study. Intersectionality originated in feminist scholarship, introduced in 1989 by Kimberle Crenshaw in her work with women of colour. Within this framework, the interlocking of various statuses, such as race, gender, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, and disability are examined. Scholars (Barnartt, 2013; Hallett, 2015; Pothier & Devlin, 2006; Warner, 2008) explained that the intersection of various social identities results in a unique experience of oppression. This approach to investigating identity has been used to highlight the multifaceted nature of disabled people’s lives (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 62) and is a
valuable lens for understanding the complexity of disabled students’ post-secondary experiences in relation to belonging.

**A multifaceted theoretical approach.**

Initially, I adopted CDT coupled with identity theories as independent but related frameworks to inform this study. However, during the analysis phase of the project, as I became immersed in the narratives, I recognized that, due to the complexity of the student experiences, the data needed to be examined in a manner that reflected this complexity. I instead utilized these frameworks in an interwoven manner, recognizing the relationship between and among these theories as a powerful tool in which to more deeply understand the intricacies of the disabled students’ belonging experience.

Informing CDT with identity theories involved interweaving the theoretical commonalities, strengths and complexities. This resulted in the discovery of distinct themes that illuminate the complexity and multidimensional nature of disability, student identity, and belonging. The interrelationship of these theoretical frameworks allowed for the perception of, and discussion of, belonging for post-secondary students with disabilities to be multifaceted.

Thus, this framework provided a way to examine disability as a complicated, messy, slippery, and fluid construct as scholars propose (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009) and captured the depth and breadth of the students’ unique experience. I offer this integrated framework, named a Multifaceted Critical Lens of Identity and Disability, and propose it be applied as an integrated framework for future inquiry related to a sense of belonging for disabled students. A more detailed discussion regarding this framework will be provided in Chapter 6.
Researcher Assumptions

Given the above theoretical orientation and conceptual frameworks as the foundation of the study, the following assumptions informed my interactions with the participants and defined the development of the interview questions:

• Historically, people with disabilities have been exposed to inequitable treatment as compared to non-disabled individuals.
• Students with disabilities bring their unique ambitions, needs, and challenges to their chosen post-secondary institution.
• Students with disabilities have to live with the challenges of social stigmatization and discrimination, not only in wider society, but also within the educational context.
• Post-secondary life for students with disabilities is complex, as these students have to navigate through established and differential power structures.
• Students are accountable for managing the educational and personal aspects of their lives.
• As social beings, we have a basic need to belong.
• Educational institutions have a social and moral responsibility to provide full inclusion, which includes a sense of belonging.
• There is existing literature that a sense of belonging for the general student population is linked to academic success and retention. Based on this evidence, I assume a sense of belonging for students with disabilities is positively linked to improved learning and academic success.

Chapter Summary

This narrative inquiry revealed insights into the post-secondary lives of students with disabilities in relation to their experiences of belonging. In this chapter, I reviewed the
theoretical paradigm of social constructivism. I outlined CDT, Erikson’s identity theory, multiple identity theory and intersectionality. I discussed how I utilized the interlink between these theoretical lenses, drawing from critical disability theory infused with identity theories to inform this study.
Chapter 3 Literature Review Introduction

In the current literature there are studies investigating faculty attitudes and willingness to accommodate students with disabilities. There are also studies examining students with disabilities’ perception of academic barriers to inclusion. There is, however, a lack of research that examines a sense of belonging as part of an inclusive post-secondary environment. Furthermore, research on this topic is very limited in a Canadian context and very few studies have included student narratives.

This chapter will highlight the rights of disabled people, changes in the construct of disability, and the development of inclusive education to provide an understanding of the historical background for disabled students. This will be followed by an overview of the literature on inclusion and belonging in the post-secondary environment.

Historical Turns and Changes Related to Disability

Over the last several decades, access to Canadian higher education institutions has improved for disabled students. However, the literature clearly indicates that this student population continues to face barriers influencing their post secondary experience of inclusion (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Riddell et al., 2005; Myers, Jenkins, Lindburg & Nied, 2013). In order to gain an understanding of disabled students’ participation, experiences, and sense of belonging in Canadian post-secondary education, I will review the history and changes related to disability. In this section, I will discuss the traditional bio-medical framework of disability and then identify historical turns and changes that have shaped disability thinking and rights for disabled people. I will then outline how those changes have influenced higher education in Canada in relation to institutional attitudes, policies, and practice that influence the disabled student’s experience of inclusion.
As discussed earlier in Chapter 1, disability has historically been conceptualized as a biological and medical deficit (Jongbloed, 2003; Barnes, 2004; Rimmerman, 2013). The biomedical model of disability locates disability within the individual who is “functionally limited and biologically inferior” (Jongbloed, 2003, p. 205). This model emphasizes pathology and clinical diagnosis, and views disability as a personal tragedy requiring a charitable response. The solution to disability is cure, treatment, or prevention in an effort to normalize (Riddell & Watson, 2003).

As a consequence of the bio-medical model, throughout the 19th and early 20th century, western societies believed it was best if disabled individuals were placed in institutions where they would be in the care of medical experts, service providers, and caregivers (Riddell, Tinklin, & Wilson, 2005). This resulted in disabled individuals largely being removed from mainstream society; thus, they were not “viable candidates for higher education” (Myers, Jenkins Lindburg, & Nied, 2013, p. 51). In Canada, large-scale institutions housed individuals with psychiatric and intellectual impairments, claiming that they needed protection (Jongbloed, 2003).

Disability in the 1940s -1970s

Rehabilitating the “disabled” body was a focus following World War II as medical and rehabilitation efforts were mobilized throughout Europe and North America to serve returning disabled veterans. As part of this rehabilitation effort, the federal government of Canada implemented a grant incentive program to provinces to encourage post secondary access for veterans. Prior to this time, higher education was accessed by the financially and socially privileged (Riddell et al., 2005). The end of World War II also signified a shift in ideology that all people had “civil, political and other rights, as noted in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948” (Enns & Neufeldt, 2003, p. 14).
In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, disability advocates pressured governments for community-based supports, access to education, and for community living. In 1962, a physically disabled student, Ed Roberts, lobbied for the right to attend the University of California at Berkley and to live independently on campus. The university agreed to house Roberts on campus, paving the way for other students with severe disabilities to attend. Many mark this event as the beginning of the disability rights movement in the USA (McCarthy, 2003). In Canada in the 1960s, welfare legislation was established based on “equality of condition (a social minimum), equality of opportunity (education), and equality of consideration (human rights)” (Jongbloed, 2003, p. 204).

The Advent of the Social Model of Disability

In the 1970s, disabled people, inspired by the race and women civil rights movements of the 1960s, became active in battling for legal rights (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005; McCarthy, 2003; Rimmerman, 2013). There was a significant turn in disability discourse where disablement was discussed as socially produced (Oliver, 1996). As noted earlier in Chapter 1, this new paradigm, the social model of disability, reflected a shift in thinking about disability from a bio-medical issue to a social/physical restriction imposed by society. Activists argued that disability was a social construct and disabled people were systematically oppressed by society restricting access to education, employment, housing, and transportation (Riddell & Watson, 2003). This model challenged the hegemonic perception of disability and upheld the goal of respect and equality for disabled people.

The social model of disability was advanced by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in the UK and by disability organizations in the USA (Oliver, 1996). In 1976, the UPIAS defined the difference between impairment and disability: impairment is as the
medical, physical, affective, or cognitive attribute of the individual causing functional limitation and disability is as the social process that disables people with impairment.

**Canadian Disability Advocacy Groups**

In Canada, shifts in public policy, services, and supports for disabled people were influenced by disability efforts internationally and by various organizations within Canada (Enns & Neufeldt, 2003). One such group was the Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL), initiated by parents of children with intellectual disabilities. Parents lobbied for services and supports so their children could live at home rather than in institutions, be educated in community schools, and be included in all aspects of community life. By the mid 1950s and 1960s, the Canadian federal and provincial governments created policy designed to support community living (Enns & Neufeldt, 2003). On-going pressure from parents resulted in school boards assuming responsibility for special schools in the 1970s. Lobbying continued in an effort to replace special school segregation with integration into neighbourhood schools. As their children grew older, parents advocated for the right to supported employment and community living (Enns & Neufeldt, 2003).

In the 1970s, the Canadian government was providing grants to provinces to support equitable programs in health and education, including post-secondary education. In 1977, the first politically active national organization in Canada representing people with all disabilities was formed, named the Coalition of Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped, later becoming the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD) (Jongbloed, 2003). The CCD, as the voice of Canadians with disabilities, called for equality and full participation in society (Jongbloed, 2003). Nationally, disability was established as an issue of civil rights and societal barriers rather than one of impairment and rehabilitation.
**Disability in the 1980s**

The politicization of disability continued quite strongly in the 1980s. In the early to mid-1980s, disabled people across North America were seeking a political voice against discrimination based on their fundamental human right to be treated as equals (McCarthy, 2003). Globally, disability awareness was growing. In 1980, the World Health Organization (WHO) adopted an approach that conveyed the difference between impairment and disability, acknowledging environmental barriers in their *International Classification of Impairment, Disability and Handicap* (later changed to the *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health*).

The year 1981 was declared by the United Nations (UN) as the International Year of Disabled Persons. That same year a non-governmental organization, Disabled Peoples’ International (DPI), was established. DPI, with a mission to promote the human rights of disabled people, adopted the social model of disability (Oliver, 1996). The years 1983–1992 were declared the United Nations Decade of the Disabled Person. The UN encouraged governments to recognize disability as a human rights issue and to facilitate the social and economic integration of disabled people.

In 1982, as a result of Canadian disability organizations lobbying government leaders, disabled people were recognized in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. With the passing of Section 15 of the *Charter* into law, “Canada became the first industrialized country to include a constitutional clause according disabled people equality before and under the law and to equal protection and benefit of the law without discrimination” (Enns & Neufeldt, 2003, p. 59). Provinces followed suit establishing human rights legislation, marking a significant advancement in policy for disabled Canadians.
Disability in the 21st Century

Worldwide, people with disabilities and advocates continue to promote a just society within a human rights framework. The UN has proclaimed December 3rd as the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. In 2004, the observance of this day focused on “Nothing About Us Without Us” to endorse the active involvement of disabled people in the planning of policies that directly impact their lives. The motto “Nothing About Us Without Us” has been taken up by many disability rights groups to demonstrate “a greater desire to participate not only in decisions affecting their own lives, but in social issues that affect them as a group” (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005, p. 112). Another significant event on the global scale was the 2008 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. During this convention, inclusive education was established as a human right for all (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014).

A number of historical turns have led to changes in how disability is perceived and to the recognition that disabled people have the right to full participation in society, including access to higher education. These changes in relation to Canadian post-secondary attitudes, policies, and practice that influence the disabled student experience will be discussed below.

Duty to Accommodate

Disability organizations advocating for change have positively influenced Canadian human rights legislation, which in turn has improved access for disabled students in higher education. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and provincial human rights statutes promote equality and inclusion, setting the standard for duty to accommodate in colleges and universities. The duty to accommodate has been instrumental in the growing number of students with disabilities entering Canadian post-secondary institutions.
Inclusion

Although post-secondary institutions have established accessible learning policies to comply with their legal duty to accommodate, the literature describes that disabled learners are not necessarily experiencing inclusion (Barnes, 2007; Hibbs & Pothier, 2006; Hutcheon & Wolbrin, 2012; Riddell et al., 2005; Myers et al., 2013; Mullins & Preyde, 2017; Waterfield & Whelan, 2017). Barnes (2007) noted, “although all universities and colleges of higher education now have a dedicated disability service unit, the rhetoric of support is rarely matched by the reality of provision” (p. 142). Riddell et al. (2005) conducted a case study with disabled students and found that many research participants had “severe difficulties in accessing ‘normal’ student experiences and often experience social isolation” (p. 152). Students with disabilities continue to face social and attitudinal barriers (Barnes, 2007; Hibbs and Pothier, 2006; Hutcheon & Wolbrin, 2012; Riddell et al., 2005; Myers et al., 2013).

Waterfield and Whelan (2017) questioned “the notion that accommodation means equity for all students and that current policies and procedures provide equitable access” (p.1002). Using a grounded theory approach with face-to-face interviews, Waterfield and Whelan (2017) studied the effects of socio-economic status on access to academic accommodations with 10 students with learning disabilities at a Canadian university. These authors found that the accommodation process can foster inequality for students with learning disabilities because students with a higher socio-economic status were able to afford testing and had less fear of stigmatization.

Inclusion in the educational context provides opportunity for all students to participate. Inclusion refers to beliefs, attitudes, and practices that allow students to experience a sense of belonging and to feel accepted, valued, and welcomed on campus (Strayhorn, 2012). Inclusive
practices promote participation and engagement. Negative attitudes and assumptions can foster ableism and marginalize disabled students “creating barriers to their inclusion and success” (Myers et al., 2013, p. 53).

**Disability Studies**

The disability rights movement also resulted in disability studies as an academic discipline and a new field of inquiry. There are a growing number of disability studies programs emerging in Canadian post secondary institutions (Enns & Neufeldt, 2003). Disability studies, rooted in the social model, explores different ways of conceptualizing disability, critiques a disabling society, and examines shifts in policy (Enns and Neufeldt, 2003). As such, on campus, this scholarship can raise awareness and foster a shift in the conceptualizing of disability. Through its examination of systemic exclusion, disability studies can serve to inform institutional policy and practice.

The advent of disability studies as a discipline has also prompted suggestions of incorporating and examining disability perspectives into the curriculum of other courses. Creating diversity–conscious course material would further enhance institutional acceptance of disability and difference (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Devlin and Pothier (2006) also recommended that higher education faculty speak to diverse ways of learning, such as sign language and Braille, to further advance inclusive policy and attitudes on campus.

**Summary of Historical Turns and Changes Related to Disability**

The disability rights movement, both within Canada and internationally, has challenged the bio-medical model of disability and advocated for the removal of barriers restricting disabled people from many aspects of society. As a result, in Canada, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and provincial human rights statutes were established. It is these statutes that
guide accessible learning policy in Canadian colleges and universities. Post-secondary policies and practices related to academic accommodation have positively impacted overall accessibility for students with disabilities. Furthermore, government funding programs have been established to improve enrolment opportunities for disabled students facing economic barriers to education. Increasingly, students with disabilities in Canada are pursuing post-secondary education.

Although access has improved, this does not necessarily equate to experiencing inclusion in the post-secondary environment. For example, using a legal and bio-medical framework to support students with disabilities can influence attitudes that may restrict full inclusion. The social model of disability, which has been advanced by many disability groups, is just beginning to be recognized as a more inclusive paradigm in Canadian higher education institutions. The social model promotes the proactive removal of environmental and attitudinal barriers to facilitate inclusion of disabled individuals. Aligned with the social model of disability are the emerging higher education policies and practices that incorporate universal design of learning and foster a sense of belonging. Integrating course materials with disability perspectives and offering disability studies programs can make a significant contribution to re-evaluating hegemonic assumptions and attitudes about disability.

It is important to be aware of the history of the disability rights movement and of higher education for disabled people to more fully understand the experiences of students with disabilities in today’s post-secondary climate. Valuable work has been accomplished through which can now lead the way to today’s work of providing full inclusion for post-secondary students with disabilities.
Sense of Belonging Defined

To offer a fuller understanding of belonging, the following descriptions are provided. Broadly speaking, a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need (Baumeister, & Leary, 1995; Marshall, Zhou, Gervan & Wiebe, 2012). Mahar, Cobigo and Stuart (2014) stated, “A sense of belonging is a core dimension of social inclusion, a recognized basic human need and a right for all individuals (United Nations, 2007)” (p. 20). Maestas, Vaquera, and Munoz Zehr, (2007) described a sense of belonging as feelings and perceptions of group membership. A sense of belonging, as an integral aspect of inclusion in an educational context, means feeling a sense of connection with institutional employees and with peers, feeling group membership, and feeling accepted (Strayhorn, 2012).

Post-Secondary Education and Belonging

Similar to Goodley (2011), Titchkosky (2011) recognized that belonging is integral to inclusivity in post-secondary education. Titchkosky questioned the common taken-for-granted socially constructed knowledge with respect to “normal” and analyzed ordinary “access talk” at a large Canadian university. Titchkosky explored “… how lines are drawn around belongingness, especially as it relates to access and participation in university life” (p. 30). Titchkosky suggested changing the question from “Who are you?” to “Who belongs?” “Who are you?” identifies the disability and the subsequent accommodations required for learning. “Who belongs?” addresses inclusion; being valued as part of the campus community.

Post-secondary inclusion and academic accommodations have been addressed by many authors exploring existing barriers (e.g., Borland & James, 1999; Burgstahler & Doe, 2000; Fichten, 1995; Fuller, Healey, Bradley, & Hall, 2004; Hadjikakou et al., 2008; Hadley, 2011; Hartley, 2010; Holloway, 2001; Kress-White, 2006; Lombardi & Murray, 2011; Mortimore,
2013; Reed et al., 2003; Reed, Lewis, & Lund-Lucas, 2006; Reed & Curtis, 2012; Shaw & Dukes, 2001, Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). While these authors have consistently argued for more inclusive policy and practice to meet the needs of students with disabilities, the concept of belonging as an integral to inclusion was not addressed.

**Social Integration**

The more specific question of social integration, along with other issues that create a positive experience for disabled students, such as academic accommodations and financial support, have been studied by Holloway (2001). Holloway analyzed institutional policies and transcripts from semi-structured interviews with six students with disabilities in a UK university for the purpose of considering implications for practice. The study concluded that the medical model of disability, which operated in this institution, failed to address the “social factors that determine the experience of disability. In spite of the appearance of inclusiveness implied by admission, students experienced marginalization and disempowerment.” (p. 612). This qualitative study emphasized the student voice and, as such, offers a rich view of their experiences.

Likewise, Hadley’s (2011) work reviewed post-secondary social integration. Hadley outlined student development theory as a framework for improving service to students with disabilities. This theory suggests that higher education institutions have an influence on a student’s psychological and sociological development. Hadley highlighted that students with disabilities may have to work harder than typical students to adapt to the “social changes unique to the college experience” (p. 78). Hadley reported more successful integration into the institution will occur for students with disabilities who are highly engaged in campus life, which
includes studying, spending time on campus, involvement in student organizations, and interacting regularly with other students and faculty.

The Association on Higher Education and Disability in the USA (AHEAD, 2009a) stressed that students with disabilities may need direct encouragement to fully engage in many aspects of campus life. Furthermore, Reed and Curtis (2012), in their literature review of academic and social barriers for students with visual impairments, found that full academic and social integration for students with disabilities contributes in part to the successful completion of post-secondary programs.

This literature offers a significant contribution to the issue of inclusivity as it highlights the importance of social acceptance/relationship within a college and university context. In the post-secondary environment inclusion needs to be identified as more than just academic accommodations. Further, a sense of belonging, as an essential human need, is a critical component of inclusion.

**Sense of Belonging; Learning and Retention for Non-disabled Students**

The literature clearly demonstrates that a sense of belonging is significant for the overall population of students in colleges and universities. As noted earlier, in the broader population of post-secondary learners, researchers have elucidated that a strong sense of belonging has a positive impact on academic motivation and academic performance and is one of the most vital factors for student success (de Beer, 2009; Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Osterman, 2000; Tinto, 1993).

With regard to academic performance, de Beer’s (2009) work, based in South Africa, involved the examination of a sense of belonging on two campuses of a university; a main urban campus and a smaller township campus. The purpose of the study was to investigate why
academic performance in the same program was significantly lower on the smaller campus. A total of 267 students responded to a questionnaire. The researcher also gathered focus group data. Data analysis revealed that students from the township campus felt alienated from the main campus and did not experience a strong sense of belonging. The author concluded that a sense of belonging may influence academic motivation and academic performance.

Morrow and Ackermann (2012) also conducted research on the topic of academic motivation and belonging. The authors examined the impact of a sense of belonging on motivation and retention in first year students in an American university. A total of 156 first year students completed an on-line survey. The authors found that students who felt a sense of belonging (feeling supported by faculty and peers) were more likely to return to second year of university.

Further, Osterman (2000) conducted a literature review on a sense of belonging with typical students in a kindergarten to grade 12 student community. One purpose of the review was to investigate the importance of a sense of belonging in an educational context. In conclusion, Osterman described a sense of belonging as a psychological need affecting motivation and learning.

In his work, Tinto (1993) explained his theory of student departure from higher education and summarized research that explored factors impacting student retention. Tinto asserted that one of the most significant influences on retention is an inclusive academic and social campus community. In his review, Tinto discussed the challenges of social integration faced by students of different ethnicity, social class, and age, but not students with disabilities.

Student retention and belonging was also explored by Madgett and Belanger (2008). These authors demonstrated a positive link between a strong sense of belonging and student
retention. Madgett and Belanger quantitatively analyzed Statistics Canada data from a longitudinal survey that examined major transitions in the lives of 18-20 year olds. One purpose of the study was to examine the effect of institutional social systems on attrition. This quantitative study involved first year 4229 students attending Canadian universities. The authors found, “A sense of belonging and confidence is vital to retention” (p. 88). Although this research provided knowledge related to Canadian post-secondary students and belonging, it was missing the enriched data of a qualitative inquiry. Moreover, the data reviewed the general student body and did not consider the sub-population of students with disabilities.

Further work involving students in a Canadian post-secondary institution was conducted by Marshall, Zhou, Gervan and Wiebe (2012). These researchers completed a mixed-methods study at a Canadian university to investigate factors affecting a sense of belonging for students enrolled in a required remedial English language course. The focus of the study was to identify factors that affected students’ sense of belonging to better inform educational policy. The quantitative portion of the study involved 419 survey respondents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 participants. Findings included many factors that affected students’ sense of belonging, such as interacting with peers/faculty, campus size, and a manageable course load. The authors concluded that students in the remedial language course needed to develop a sense of belonging if they were “to gain a sense of legitimacy, which in turn can serve to foster self esteem and the potential to succeed in higher education” (p. 135). This study, exploring a sense of belonging at a Canadian post-secondary institution, provided a space for student stories but did not involve students with disabilities.

Other researchers have investigated a sense of belonging in part-time students (Kember, Lee, & Li, 2001) and with non-traditional students, such as learners who differ in class, maturity,
and ethnicity (Johnson et al., 2007). Kember, Lee, and Li (2001) researched attrition and a sense of belonging with part-time university students in Hong Kong. The purpose of this study was to determine whether part-time students experienced a sense of belonging and what contributed to a sense of belonging. Semi-structured interviews with 53 participants were conducted. The researchers found that “… affiliations with-in a class group can assist students to learn and to learn in more meaningful ways” (p. 340). The researchers concluded that a sense of belonging impacts a student’s decision to complete their program of study.

Non-traditional students were also the subject of a study completed by Johnson et al. (2007). Johnson et al.(2007) investigated a sense of belonging with a national American sample of first year university students from various racial and ethnic groups. An on-line survey was completed by 2,967 respondents. Findings indicated that white students had a significantly stronger sense of belonging than those from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. The researchers concluded that campus stakeholders should facilitate an inclusive campus climate to positively influence diverse students’ sense of belonging. Although this study offered student perspectives on a sense of belonging they did not involve participants with disabilities.

With further regard to marginalized students, there is research that has examined a sense of belonging for students of colour (Johnson, et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012) and for students who are disadvantaged socio-economically (Ostrove & Long, 2007). Strayhorn (2012) suggested that a “sense of belonging may be particularly significant for students who are marginalized in college contexts” (p. 17). While the above aforementioned studies shed light on belongingness in higher education, they do not focus on students with disabilities. Leake and Stodeen (2014) suggest the lack of research on belonging with disabled students is a result of researchers’ focus on the academic and physical accommodations for this population of learners.
Sense of Belonging: Students with Disabilities

The limited research based on students with disabilities includes an inquiry involving American college students with disabilities. This work, based on a social constructivist paradigm, was conducted by Graham-Smith and Lafayette (2004). An electronic survey was distributed which questioned the areas of support that were most helpful from the disability office. Overwhelmingly, the responses of the 71 participants indicated that the level of care from staff had a significant impact on a sense of belonging. The fact that the survey questions in this study were open-ended allowed for the student voice. However, this study was limited to the context of the disability service office.

A rare Canadian study involving disabled students was completed by Mullins and Preyde (2013). Mullins and Preyde (2013) conducted in-depth interviews in their phenomenological study of 10 students with invisible disabilities in an Ontario university. The authors were interested in examining the experiences of the participants to investigate what elements of the university experience were most restrictive to access for this unique student population with invisible disabilities (students with ADHD, dyslexia, and mental illness). Among other obstacles, participants cited social barriers related to negative social attitudes. Participants reported hearing comments from peers “that students with their disabilities did not belong at university.” Although this study was broad in its inquiry of student experiences, and although it focused only on students with invisible disabilities, it does contribute to the paucity of research on belonging for Canadian post-secondary disabled students.

A more recent study based on students with disabilities on the topic of belongingness was conducted by Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, and Newman (2015). These researchers completed grounded theory research with 8 disabled students from a Rhode Island university. The authors analyzed
data from individual student interviews to generate a theory on the development of a sense of belonging. Vaccaro et al. (2015) proposed that the development of a sense of belonging for students with disabilities is interrelated to self-advocacy, social relationships and mastery of the student role. Although this research provides rich, detailed data from student narratives and contributes to the limited number of studies on belonging for post secondary disabled students, it was not conducted in a Canadian post-secondary context.

**Social Relationships and a Sense of Belonging.**

Social acceptance has been noted as a critical foundation to a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DeWall & Bushman, 2011). Regarding relationships with faculty and a sense of belonging for disabled post secondary students, conflicting findings have been reported. In their qualitative study of 5 disabled students from a large American university, investigating accommodation-seeking strategies, Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger and Lan (2010) found that the participants experienced challenges developing positive relationships with faculty and/or receiving necessary academic supports. Olney and Brockelman (2003) reported similar findings from interviews of disabled university students in their work exploring the ways in which the participants managed the perception of others. In contrast, Troiano (2003) reported that students with disabilities had very positive relationships with faculty. Troiano’s grounded theory study examined the experiences of 9 students with learning disabilities attending an American college.

The literature regarding peers and disabled students reveals challenges in connections and social relationships. Megivern, Pellerio and Mowbray (2003), in their qualitative study of barriers to higher education for 35 American college students with psychiatric disabilities, found many of the participants experienced isolation, stigma and discrimination. Another American
study noted that students with disabilities reported more difficulties socially adjusting as compared to non-disabled students (Adams & Proctor, 2010). This study analyzed questionnaires completed by 115 disabled students and 115 non-disabled students across 5 post-secondary intuitions.

The significance of peer support to a sense of belonging for disabled students is further highlighted in research completed by Kimball, Friedensen, and Silva (2017). Kimball, Friedensen and Silva (2017) conducted a qualitative study with 8 students with learning disabilities from a small college in the northeast USA. Employing narrative research techniques, the authors relied on interviews to explore the students’ disability identity and their academic and non-academic college experiences. One significant finding the authors identified was the importance of peer support. Participants described peers as part of the social connections that supported academic success at the college. Although these authors did not specifically address the construct of belonging, their work does contribute to the topic in that it demonstrates an association of positive peer relationships to academic success for disabled students.

**Synthesis of the Literature**

Research has documented that the number of students with disabilities entering colleges and universities has steadily increased. The disability movement has challenged barriers to accessibility and, as a result, post-secondary institutions have established inclusive policies and practices. Although students with disabilities have academic access, inclusion may not necessarily be experienced. In an educational/social context, inclusion involves a sense of belonging.

Research has also demonstrated, through quantitative methodologies, that a sense of belonging in the general student population is connected to outcomes such as enhanced academic
performance and program completion. Few researchers, however, have investigated a sense of belonging with post-secondary students with disabilities. The scarcity of research in this area has prompted me to seek an increased understanding of belonging through the personal experiences of students with disabilities. Studies on belonging may have significant implications for future disability policy and practice; policy and practice which align with the value of inclusivity.

Furthermore, there is very little qualitative research involving the voice of students with disabilities, especially from Canadian colleges and universities. Most research on belonging is quantitative in nature using surveys to explore the student experience and a sense of belonging. Although some studies did include interviews, they did not address belonging as an essential component of inclusion. One study, (Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004), which collected data through an open-ended on-line survey, allowed for students with disabilities to provide more details of their experiences. However, this research targeted only how participants experienced service from the disability office, rather than how they experienced the overall post-secondary environment related to belonging. This further led me to choose a qualitative approach in which to study a sense of belonging through the participants’ personal stories. Additional qualitative research is necessary to provide rich meaning and deeper understanding. The current study addresses the literature gap and contributes to knowledge regarding an inclusive college environment beyond the obligation of technical and procedural academic accommodations.

Similar to my study, some scholars have grounded their work within a social constructivist framework. Research and discussion of this nature is significant as highlighting disability as a socially constructed phenomenon can empower students with a disability. Further research, such as this inquiry, that critically explores the socially constructed notion of “normal”
can help to create a shift for students with disabilities to inclusion and to a sense of belonging within their campus community.
Chapter 4 Methods

Introduction

As noted earlier in Chapter 2, the social constructivist paradigm, critical disability theory and identity theories informed the design of this research. This inquiry examined student experiences of belonging on a college campus with a mission value of inclusivity. The literature review revealed primarily quantitative approaches to investigating a sense of belonging in higher education. Therefore, a qualitative design was chosen to deepen my understanding from an experiential perspective. In this study, multiple subjective perspectives were gathered to gain deep insight into, and give meaning to, a sense of belonging for post-secondary students with disabilities. Details of study participants are provided in Appendix D, Participant Demographics.

In this chapter, I will provide a rationale for my choice of qualitative research and describe the chosen study design of narrative research. The terms narrative will then be defined as it is presented in the literature and the distinguishing characteristics of narrative inquiry and narrative research will be compared. Next, participant sampling, recruitment, data collection and analysis will be discussed. To conclude, study rigor will be outlined.

Methodology

Qualitative research.

As an inquiry process, qualitative research is used to understand and explain participant meaning. In his description of qualitative methodology, Creswell (2013) explained that the researcher explores a social or human problem and uniquely captures details of the participants’ experiences. I was drawn to this research approach as it provides the opportunity the hear voices that are rarely heard. It also includes context as an essential component and allows for researcher self-awareness and self-reflection.
Further, a qualitative research design was chosen as the best approach to explore a deeper understanding of student experiences within the context of the social culture of an organization, especially since inclusivity is relatively unexplored within Canadian colleges and universities. In an effort to understand the participants' every day experiences as a student in relation to belonging, it was necessary to gain insight into their beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions as expressed through the stories they shared.

Clandinin (2007) confirmed that qualitative researchers have an interest in understanding rather than prediction and control. Creswell (2013) informed that, "We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices...." (p. 40). Creswell asserted that qualitative research is conducted in order to learn about the research problem directly from the participants. Oliver (1996) stated that disability research should be based on listening to the voices of people with disabilities, disability research needs to ensure relevancy to their lives, and it should aim to improve their circumstances.

Creswell (2013) and Merriam (1998) both highlighted the importance of understanding one’s own philosophical assumptions and identifying a research paradigm before committing to a qualitative study. A research paradigm is a set of beliefs as to how one perceives and makes sense of the world, serving as a guiding framework for the researcher’s actions (Creswell, 2013). Ontological assumptions represent the nature of reality. Epistemological assumptions describe a theory of knowledge or how knowledge is acquired. These assumptions lead the researcher to the decision of a particular methodology; that is, the set of beliefs, principles, and practices used to conduct the research (Creswell, 2013). The researcher then considers the practical application of the study or the methods. The methods are the tools and techniques used to gather, analyze, and report the data.
I align with the ontological and epistemological assumptions that knowledge/reality is varied and multiple and based on the subjective perception of each individual. Individuals use these realities to make sense of the world. I therefore located my research within a social constructivist paradigm. The social constructivist seeks to understand the world in which the participant lives and to explore the complexity of perceptions rather than seeking to identity a causal relationship (Creswell, 2013). This paradigmatic orientation, along with my ontological and epistemological commitments, directed my choice to conduct qualitative research.

As a qualitative line of inquiry, I was drawn to narrative research as it provides the opportunity for storied voices and is useful for understanding, rather than predicting and controlling, educational phenomenon.

_Narrative._

In the literature, there is no one definition of “narrative” (Clandinin, 2013; Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) stressed that the term “narrative” holds many meanings by different disciplines and explained that there is a “wide range of social research that comes under the broad narrative umbrella” (p.vii). The following definition is offered as being useful for social science, “Narratives (stories) in human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connects events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people’s experience of it .” (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997, p. xvi as cited in Elliott, 2005, p.3).

To delineate “narrative” from “story”, a story is the account of an experience as told by an individual that can be used to construct and reconstruct narratives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). In contrast, “Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and
it names the patterns of inquiry for its study.” Therefore, narrative researchers write narratives of experience; experiences that are told as stories by participants.

The terms narrative inquiry and narrative research have been used interchangeably as they both use stories to investigate a research problem. Both narrative inquirers and narrative researchers emphasize stories as sequential events and consider story as “the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4). Although both methodologies use stories, Clandinin (2007) clearly differentiated narrative inquiry from narrative research. I will review the distinctive features of each below.

**Narrative inquiry.**

Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly were instrumental in developing narrative inquiry as a methodology in social science research. In 1990, Clandinin and Connelly developed “a way to attend to the whole of people’s lives through a methodology we know as narrative inquiry” (Clandinin & Raymond, 2006, p. 101). These researchers described narrative inquiry as both the phenomenon of interest and the methodology, naming the phenomenon as the “story” and the inquiry “narrative” (Clandinin, 2013). The foundation of narrative inquiry is that people live storied lives and that experience is the stories people live. As such, this methodology provides a way to understand experiential knowledge, a way to study experience (Clandinin, 2013).

A hallmark of narrative inquiry is the study of experience as it is lived. The “telling” of the story is also significant, but the researcher experiences the “living” of the story by becoming part of the participant’s lived experience. The narrative inquirer enters the participant’s life, experiencing the experience he/she is studying (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This level of engagement with the participant reflects the deeply relational aspect of narrative inquiry. In my
examination of student experiences expressed as stories, I drew from elements of narrative inquiry in my chosen approach of *narrative research*.

**Narrative research.**

Narrative research, as differentiated from narrative inquiry, has also been labeled in the literature as narrative approach, narrative study, or research using narrative (Elliot, 2005). “Narrative research has many forms, using a variety of analytic practices and is rooted in different social and humanities disciplines” (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004, as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 70). Narrative research, as in narrative inquiry, involves the study of experience. The difference lies in what the researcher is actually studying. Narrative research studies stories told during participant interviews rather than studying the actual story as it unfolds which is captured through living alongside the participant (Clandinin, 2007).

Narrative researchers examine experience told and assign significance to these events within social contexts (Elliot, 2005). Smith and Sparks (2008) informed that stories are part of one’s everyday life, through which we can learn about ourselves and others’ experiences. Smith and Sparks (2008) further described that narrative is a very useful tool for providing insight into the way in which organizations shape individual’s lives; whether they constrain or enable. Narrative research, as in narrative inquiry, gives voice to marginalized individuals and can uncover truths about human experiences, thus providing avenues for social change. As Reissman (2008) noted, “stories can mobilize others into action for progressive social change” (p. 9).

A core premise of narrative research is that a person’s reality is constructed individually through the narration of stories (Lichtman, 2014). Narrative researchers recognize multiple truths and uphold the belief that knowledge is socially constructed (Salkind, 2010). Through the
recounting and through the analysis and interpretation of the stories, both knowledge and meaning of the lived experience is highlighted.

The narrative researcher relies on his/her chosen paradigmatic framework to guide data collection, analysis, and interpretation. As I locate myself in the social constructivist paradigm, narrative research is an appropriate fit for my research purposes. Although I was unable to be in the midst of the participants’ ongoing experiences, I studied student experience through told stories using narrative research as an applicable methodological choice, a choice which also incorporates reflection, representation of meaning and recognizes context. Narrative research is a favourable methodology to honour student voices and to build a rich and insightful understanding of the educational phenomena of a sense of belonging.

**Sampling and Recruitment**

This study involved collecting the stories of participants through in-depth individual interviews. As an employee at the College with an identified role, I took steps to ensure that any potential participant did not feel obligated to partake in this research based on our history of working together. Thus, I publicly advertised for volunteer participation and students were not prompted to participate. However, I acknowledge that my working relationship with the students may still have resulted in an effort on their part to support my role as a researcher.

Flyers and posters informing and inviting participants were placed at the Disability Service Office and in other areas throughout the main campus (tutoring centres, cafeteria, etc.). The recruitment poster is provided as Appendix C. I included information regarding the impact of their participation with respect to knowledge translation.

Through purposive sampling I recruited students who were diagnosed with a disability and who attended part-time or full-time face-to-face classes on the main campus of the College.
A group of 9 students from the College’s main campus volunteered to become participants. The participants represent a wide age range (age 21 – 58) and a variation in disability; mental health, physical, learning, attention. The participants are engaged in a variety of on-campus face-to-face classes in a variety of diploma/certificate programs and university transfer courses.

As students with disabilities typically reduce their course load, most study participants (seven of nine students) are enrolled as part-time students. There are programs at the College that are only offered on a full-time basis, such as Nursing, and two students in the study are full-time nursing students.

**Data Collection**

There is no single approach to the collection of data in narrative research (Creswell, 2013, Elliot, 2005). In this study, interviews with students, where stories were told, were collected as the data. Semi-structured, broad, and open-ended questions were used in each interview. One-on-one interviews were conducted face to face and were guided by a general interview protocol. I wanted to use this approach because it allowed for more depth and breath of responses and provided me, as the researcher, with flexibility to add questions and to draw out further insights from the students. Students were able to “take the lead” when answering broad questions. The use of a general interview protocol also allowed the students to speak more freely without hindrance or restraint and for the opportunity to prompt students to reflect and to provide further explanation.

Trained as a speech/language pathologist, I engaged in active listening and was acutely aware of the students’ communication skills and conversation style. I noted that the students were at ease narrating their belonging experiences and when providing confidential information.
Students were eager to share their stories on belonging and all students expressed the value of participating in a research project.

Before, during and after the interviews I took field notes. My field notes documented information such as how particular questions were positioned during the interview, my observations of student communication style and responses, and thoughts leading up to, during, and after the interview. I also wrote in my reflexive journal prior to and after each interview. I found this process to be very beneficial in maintaining self-awareness as I reflected on my personal experience as a novice researcher/interviewer and explored my thoughts and feelings. More detail regarding the use of field notes and my reflexive journal as strategies to mitigate researcher bias will be discussed later in this chapter under Study Rigor.

Prior to the interview, the purpose of the research study was reviewed with each student. The students were also informed that they could withdraw at any time from the study. The risk of feeling distress or discomfort during the interview was discussed prior to the interview and I also arranged resources (counselling services) and a quiet room if needed for students if they felt any distress during or after the interviews.

Informed consent was reviewed in detail with each student. Students were welcomed to discuss any questions or concerns. Consent forms were provided and signed prior to the interviews. Prior to the interview, the use of a recording device was also discussed. The students informed me that they were comfortable with the use of a recorder. Interviews were approximately 45-60 minutes in duration. Both notes and recordings were taken. Recordings were later transcribed verbatim.

Flexibility in scheduling and interview location was offered to each student. The students were also offered the opportunity to be interviewed in two sessions if fatigue or scheduling were
a factor. All interviews were conducted in one session. Each interview was conducted in a quiet study room located in the Library of the College. Each student provided a pseudonym that was used to protect his or her identity.

**Data Analysis**

In this study, I initially read and listened to the narrative transcripts multiple times and drew from my conceptual frameworks to align the data. In the narrative research approach to inquiry, a thematic analysis can be conducted where themes are compared within and across multiple narratives (Creswell, 2013; Reissman, 2008). Significant phrases, sentences, and paragraphs related to a sense of belonging were extracted. Transcripts were coded based on emerging themes, such as the students’ perception of her/his belonging, the significance attributed to a sense of belonging, influential factors such as connection with peers/faculty, involvement in campus activities, and any barriers to belonging.

Since this is my first research project, and because the sample size is small, I felt it was valuable to organize the data manually. I used a form of data analysis called analysis of narratives which Polkinghorne (1995) indicated results in a description of themes and where common attributes are classified into concepts or categories. In my analysis, I broke down stories to common elements. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recommended looking for patterns, themes, and narrative threads that emerge across the experiences of the participants. I highlighted areas of similarity and/or difference as I identified emerging themes. I then reflected, synthesized and interpreted the data. Finally, I returned to the transcripts repeatedly to check for accuracy.

Further, I collected information regarding the context of the stories, as outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). When interpreting the data, I situated the stories within the students’ experience at the College and within their own historical context, such as their
highschool student experience. Creswell (2013) stated that "In the end, the narrative study tells the story of individuals unfolding in a chronology of their experiences, set within their personal, social, and historical context, and including the important themes in those lived experiences” (p. 75). Considering contextual information provided richer data in which to analyze while seeking a deeper understanding of a sense of belonging in post-secondary disabled students.

**Study Rigor**

Study rigor, or the thoroughness of the research, will be discussed in this section. Ethical considerations and trustworthiness account for study rigor. These measures of quality attempt to establish accuracy and clarity of the study procedure and reported findings (Creswell, 2007).

**Ethical considerations.**

1. The Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board and the College Ethics Board provided approval for this research project.

2. Volunteer participants were informed of the details of the study including purpose, rationale and expected length of interview. Participants who wished to be involved in the project were asked to sign an informed consent document. Included as Appendix A is the Letter of Initial Contact provided to each participant. The Informed Consent is included as Appendix C.

3. Participants were made aware that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

4. All names of participants and those named in narratives were changed for the purpose of confidentiality.

5. To protect the privacy of the participants, an adequate level of confidentiality of the research data was maintained.
6. All recorded transcripts, consent forms, field notes, and notes generated from interviews were protected through computer passwords and locked files.

7. I made every attempt to be sensitive to the participants’ needs. For example, if participants at any time felt fatigued or needed a break from the interview process, they were advised that another interview time could be scheduled. As noted earlier, I also arranged counselling services to be available and a quiet room if needed for participants if they felt any distress during or after the interviews.

   **Trustworthiness.**

   Lincoln and Guba (1985) described that the trustworthiness of a study is important to evaluate its worth. Establishing trustworthiness encompasses the strategies of credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2007).

   **Credibility.**

   Credibility refers to establishing confidence in the truth of the findings. In order to demonstrate an accurate account of the belonging narratives, the following measures of credibility were completed:

   *Prolonged engagement.*

   I read and reviewed the data multiple times. Thoroughly engaging with the data provided the opportunity to become very familiar with each student’s narrative, with the depth and breadth of the stories, and for deep considerations. Returning to the data repeatedly also allowed for cross-referencing and checking for accuracy as I analyzed and interpreted the data and wrote the chapters of my thesis.
Peer debriefing.

I regularly debriefed and explored various aspects of the study with peers/colleagues as I reviewed, analyzed and interpreted the data. These discussions included feedback on emergent thematic categories, insights on belonging, unique belonging needs of disabled students, strengths and limitations of the data, conclusions and researcher perspectives and assumptions. I also debriefed with my principle supervisor on an on-going basis throughout all stages of the project. These discussions offered feedback and direction regarding salient themes and the analysis process and guided me to think more critically and more deeply within my chosen conceptual frameworks. My principal supervisor was also provided with audio recordings of 2 interviews to provide feedback regarding my interpretations.

Member checking.

Merriam (2009) reminds the researcher to member check by asking the study participants to check the accuracy of the researcher’s interpretations. While interviewing, I checked with the participants for accuracy and clarification. Following the data analysis, I invited students through email to provide any feedback regarding salient themes and findings. Students were also welcomed to ask any questions and/or to present any concerns. The email of themes sent to students is provided in Appendix G. Three students replied. These students did not respond with any questions or concerns. A copy of the feedback emails is provided in Appendix H.

Transferability.

Transferability refers to demonstrating that the findings are applicable to other contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the researcher provide detailed contextual information to ensure the research can be applied to other contexts. Merriam (1998) urged the researcher to consider if the research findings can be applied to other situations.
While narrative interviews provide rich data on the research topic, the narratives are highly individualized and unique, which can limit transferability. That is, given the nature of narrative data and the small sample of participants in this study, the findings cannot be generalized. However, if each step of this project was followed to conduct research with disabled students at another small Western Canadian college, similar experiences in relation to belongingness may be revealed. In this way, the findings of this study may be transferrable.

**Confirmability.**

Shenton (2004) describes confirmability as the extent in which the research findings are a result of the participants’ experiences rather than any “characteristics” or “preferences” of the researcher’s. Strategies to address confirmability included maintaining both field notes and a reflexive journal. In my journal, I wrote down my beliefs, values, and assumptions, in addition to my thoughts/reflections during all stages of the project. I paid particular attention to any biases/assumptions related to the fact that each participant was also on my disability service caseload. I used my journal as a place to critically review my role at the College as a disability service coordinator and that my position in this study was as a researcher only. I also reflected upon my history as a practitioner in the field of rehabilitation medicine. As indicated earlier, I came to this project with a background as both a speech-language pathologist and a disability service coordinator. I used my journal entries to remain consciously aware that my training and past professional work was anchored within the bio-medical model and deficit-based thinking. Through on-going reflexive journaling, I critically explored my biases and preconceptions. Field notes were recorded before, during and after interviews. In addition to overall observations of each stage of the research, my field notes contained general summaries of each interview, comments on particular interview questions, and key ideas.
Keeping an introspective record during the research process allowed for an on-going examination of my assumptions and thoughts. In turn this affected my actions by being consciously aware of the vocabulary I used when interviewing students. For example, I avoided the use of professional jargon and avoided referring to past conversations based on the fact that I knew each student in a professional capacity.

**Chapter Summary**

In summary, this chapter described the qualitative nature of this study in addition to the study design of narrative research. Participant sampling, recruitment, data collection, analysis and study rigor were also outlined.
Chapter 5 Findings

Introduction

Through their stories, participants described their experience of belonging as it relates to becoming a student. Analysis of stories revealed a prominent theme of becoming a student, which illustrates the process of participants’ learning how to be a student in the post-secondary environment and offers insight into the meaning students ascribe to a sense of belonging. Two other themes were found to impact participants’ process of developing a sense of belonging: narratives of engagement and narratives of barriers to belonging. Narratives of engagement involve stories of interactions with peers, faculty, and staff. Narratives of barriers to belonging are student stories which take into account systemic, physical, environmental, and attitudinal barriers to experiencing belonging at the College. I will describe in detail these three narratives, which encompass the stories and meaning of belongingness in a post-secondary environment as told by students with disabilities.

Narratives of Becoming a Student

“I just didn’t know how to be a student.” (Madeline)

Stories told about becoming a student will be portrayed in depth so as to illuminate the nature of the participants’ experiences as they relate to belonging. Narratives of becoming a student incorporate 2 distinct storylines:

1. Experiences of high school, which serve as a rich background and contrast to learning how to be a post-secondary student.

2. Experiences of acquiring new student skills in order to succeed in the role as a post-secondary student.
Narratives of becoming a student illustrate this dynamic process in an educational landscape vastly different from high school. Interestingly, of a total of nine student participants in this study, five (Alice, Sophie, Madeline, Lauren, Abigail) did not graduate from high school. A total of eight (Rebecca, April, William, Alice, Sophie, Madeline, Lauren, Abigail) students attended adult education upgrading courses to complete high school or to improve their grades to be academically eligible for post-secondary education. I will outline secondary school stories, which provide contextual significance in that all nine students describe insufficient skills to succeed in a higher education institution.

Further shaping this narrative are stories of cultivating and establishing new skills to succeed as a student. I will detail the essential aspects of being a student that the participants were coming to know through their experience at the College.

Participants also narrated their development of a sense of belonging as they journeyed through their process of becoming a student. I will capture the meaning students’ ascribe to belongingness and its impact on learning how to be a student.

**Student skills.**

“She [the instructor] was very smart and I couldn’t keep up with what she was talking about. I was too new and I didn’t exactly know how to study or take notes because I had always been okay in high school without doing those kind of things.” (Margarite)

Across all stories, participants discussed a variety of critical student skills they had not mastered in high school. These include how to take notes, study, organize course material, manage time, write essays, ask for help, write tests, orally present reports, access resources, lead a group, plan/execute research, and how to learn what is expected from the instructor. All participants emphasized the importance of acquiring these student skills in their process of becoming a student.
High School.

“In high school, I didn’t get the support back then that I have now.” (Abigail)

Storied lives as a post-secondary student were narrated against the backdrop of the participants’ experiences as a high school student. Predominant in high school stories is the thread that participants did not know how to be a student. Eight students described negative academic and social experiences in high school, which resulted in little or no motivation or enjoyment in learning. Student stories speak loudly of a lack of support and a lack of belongingness, which led to skipping classes and “dropping out”.

William, a second year Arts and Science student at the College, is gifted in mathematics and has been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and a reading/writing learning disability. William articulated his painful struggle in high school as it relates to both his lack of knowledge of how to be a student and to his peers’ reaction to his disability. William explained:

…by the time I arrived in high school, I hadn't learned any of the social or organizational skills necessary to get the work done and by the time any given day was out, I was typically too burnt out to focus on it anyway. All that was left to do was escape.

William clarified that he was not taught the skills to structure his time or how to interact with his peers, “Their idea of teaching you to manage your time or to develop relationships with your peers, or to create a slideshow and presentation, is primarily built around penalizing you for not already having known it.” Rather than experiencing belongingness, William’s reality in high school as an individual with a disability was one of alienation and marginalization. William expressed:

I was intellectually and socially out of sync with my peers and culturally dramatically disconnected from them. I didn't have a peer group. I had one peer up until grade 11,
when he graduated a year before I was scheduled to. By the time I got to high school, there wasn't really anything worthwhile left for me there besides that one friend and a couple of the staff, like the janitors, who treated me like a person.

Abigail’s high school experience parallels that of William’s in that she endured bullying and isolation. Diagnosed with a learning disability in reading/writing, Abigail spoke of the stigma attached to being a student with a disability:

I was bullied from, basically right through. I failed a lot of things in high school but I still pushed myself to do things. It was hard back then. It was, if you had a disability, you were cast out completely.

Not knowing how to be a student, and without adequate resources, Abigail failed several high school courses. Currently, Abigail is a 4th year nursing student at the College and is experiencing academic success.

April, Madeline, Rebecca, Lauren and Sophie shared high school stories of skipping classes and lacking motivation to learn. April explained that during high school she had not yet been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. April skipped multiple classes and graduated from grade 12 by taking “easier courses”. Over two decades later, April attends the College as a mature student in the Classroom and Community Support Worker program.

In sharing stories of her high school experience, Madeline recounted how she contemplated dropping out of school in grade 11 due to lack of motivation. Madeline skipped classes and obtained poor grades. Diagnosed with clinical depression and generalized anxiety disorder, Madeline eventually did leave school in grade 12 and reflected, “I just didn’t know how to be a student.” “I was just not a motivated person.” “I just had no drive and got out.”
Madeline, now a second year Arts and Science student further describes, “…I had really low self esteem and was pretty miserable.”

Rebecca, currently a full-time student attending her second year of the Child and Youth Diploma program remarked, “I guess I didn’t apply myself as a high school student. So that’s okay, because I had a learning disability. So, I would skip class a lot or act out, that kind of thing. I just didn’t put the effort into it.”

Both Lauren and Sophie were physically injured after high school, but described their experiences in high school as challenging due to other factors. Lauren explained that she did not feel motivated or a sense of belonging. Lauren skipped classes and eventually left high school before completion. “I felt very disconnected because my family moved for me to start grade eight. We moved to Vancouver and I was going to, all of a sudden, a huge high school. I was not used to that.” Lauren continued, “I tried it 3 times for 3 different years and I quit. I quit every time because I could not get connected to the students or teachers or even the work because it was way too boring.” Sophie explained that, due to family issues, high school, “didn’t go over too well. Kind of got into some things I shouldn’t have. Never graduated high school. Kind of dropped out around the end of grade 10, but I ended up skipping most of grade 10.”

Lack of motivation, skipping classes, and lack of academic success was a dominant high school storyline. Both William and Abigail reflected on the discrimination and stigma associated with disability. These high school stories provide a meaningful context in which to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ student and belonging experiences in a post-secondary landscape.

Learning how to be a student.

“I didn’t learn the academic skills you need to succeed in school.” (William)
Shaped by past high school experiences, stories reflect an unknowingness of how to be a student as participants enter post-secondary education. Learning how to be a student is a dynamic process whereby the participants first become acutely aware that they are lacking in the skills to academically succeed at the College and then intentionally seek to learn these skills. Embedded in the students’ narratives are learning a number of new skills such as note taking, studying, reflecting on course material, taking tests, and giving oral presentations in class. Captured in the stories are the participants’ tireless efforts to continue to learn student skills and their determination to succeed academically.

Margarite, diagnosed with general anxiety disorder and the only participant in the study who did not struggle in high school, discussed her journey of learning how to be a student in the post-secondary context, “I was too new and didn’t exactly know how to study or take notes because I had always been okay in highschool without doing those things”. In her third year of a full-time nursing program degree, Margarite summarized that she now knows “how to make notes and how to reflect on these notes”, in addition to learning how to study, how to access resources, and “how to be more prepared and on top of things.” Regarding accessing disability services and counselling, Margarite commented, “So, that was really beneficial.” Margarite continued, “… it’s been way better since. They helped me deal with the stress and anxiety I was feeling during tests and a counsellor helped me with studying tips and had test taking methods that were really helpful as well.”

Similarly, learning how to study, how to take notes and how to access support services were critical for April. April, as a mature student (53 years), returned to school to complete the Classroom and Community Support Worker program part-time. April remarked, “I didn’t know
how the process of going to college worked.” April was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder while she was attending the College. Interestingly, April commented that it was during her math course where she learned the important student skill of how to focus, “I even enjoyed the math because it was teaching me how to focus”. April illustrated how accessing academic counselling has helped her as a student and with her educational planning. In April’s process of learning how to be a student, she recounted learning many new skills and how she has helped learners new to the College:

I actually think I’ve been a positive influence to people around me because of what I’ve learned through my own struggles with the writing of essays. I’ve been able to sort of be there for people just coming [to] college that are having similar struggles.

Madeline shared her determination in learning how to study and how to ask for help when needed. “I definitely had to be like, okay, this isn’t working for me and I’ve had to get tutoring for some classes and then figure it out that that method and how they taught me really worked for me.” Madeline continued, “The other thing is definitely I’ve had to access college resources [counselling, disability services] and it’s been interesting.” Further, Madeline illustrated the importance of learning what is expected from instructors:

I find that when you start your first course, the first exam is the most stressful because you’re like, oh god, how do they mark? As soon as you know how they mark on that first exam, you know either your studying was crap or it wasn’t and you did really well. If it wasn’t very good, you go and you find out what you need to do differently.

Likewise, Margarite commented on the importance of becoming familiar with the teaching style of instructors, “There’s some good teachers and some not so good teachers that you work with and it’s a challenge. You figure it out as the semester goes along as to what they’re looking for.”
The thread of proactively accessing help to be a successful student continues with Abigail’s narrative. Abigail, soon to graduate from the rigorous full-time four year nursing program, commented on her process of becoming a student and how she learned how to ask for help and to access resources. Abigail asked for tutoring, scheduled appointments with the Writing Centre and requested academic accommodations from Disability Services. “Well, I got a lot of support from staff, of course.” Abigail explained, “When I first started the program, I didn’t know about them [resources] and then I did find out about them. So that’s when I got access to them. Once that happened, it was easier for me.” Abigail continued, “I got help on tests, definitely help on essay writing when I needed it, tutoring when needed. There’s a lot of good things and that’s what helped me get through the program too.”

Lauren, a mature student (age 58), reiterated April’s point of learning how to be a student through accessing college resources. Lauren, a part-time student in the Classroom and Community Support Worker program, was injured as a result of an accident, sustaining a spinal, neck and head injury. Lauren is mobile, experiences back pain, and is hypersensitive to noise, light and temperature. Lauren remarked, “I had to figure out what I’m going to do to succeed.” Lauren recounted that she learned to ask for help at the Tutoring Centre, Counselling Office and Disability Service Office, “… I have to ask for what I need. I mean, that’s my job and I know that.”

William, now in his second year at the College, enrolled in three part-time university level courses, described his success as a post-secondary student, “This is the first time it’s at least net productive, so it’s better than before.” For William, developing student skills, such as organizing course material and time management, is associated in part with his job as a peer tutor:
…that [tutoring his peers] was also how I got through my courses. They needed to learn the course content and I needed to keep pace with the course. I needed to learn to play student, so it worked out for both of us.

William also discussed the skills of leading a group, giving presentations and planning research, “Those are the things you normally learn on your way to graduating from high school. I didn’t.” Regarding his process of learning how to be a student, William asserted, “It’s a work in progress…” and continued, “So, I’m better at organizing my way through college than I used to be.”

The “work in progress” sentiment was common to many stories. For example, Madeline commented on learning how to be a student, “So, it’s really been a process for sure.” Alice considered her development as a student, “It’s kind of a work in progress.” Through this process, Alice is getting to know her learning style, her strengths and challenges, “… now that I am aware of the challenges that face me, I think it makes that much easier because then you know that you have the accommodations and what you need to be successful. Then you know what’s required.” Margarite explained that she gradually, over three years, learned the skills to be a student and experienced an increase in a sense of belonging.

Becoming a student is complex and multifaceted. Participants did not enter the post-secondary environment equipped with skills from high school in order to succeed. Participants navigate the process of becoming a student while managing their disability. Madeline is becoming a student while also being a single parent. Madeline first attended the College when her daughter was 5 months old and explained that she has, “… just kind of been playing it by year” and that she is “figuring it out through learning how to be a student…” Madeline continued:
I just didn’t know how to be a student. I didn’t really apply myself and I hadn’t really ever done that. To come out of that and be like, okay, I have to learn how to be a student and as a mom. It was really what’s going to be the most effective way to learn the material, time management. Just things like that. What’s it going to take for me to be able to juggle these things and actually learn the material appropriately, and where my strengths and disabilities are and how do I learn the most efficiently?

Stories show a powerful drive to succeed and all participants are currently academically successful in the post-secondary learning environment. Abigail shared, “The academic experience was good.” In discussing her student experience, Madeline commented on her academic success and on how she is now a highly motivated student, “Academic-wise, it’s been really good. It’s interesting to see how different my grades are now compared to what I was like in high school. And college is supposed to be harder in aspects.”

In summary, the narrative of becoming a student strongly resonates throughout student stories. Stories that shape this theme encompass uncertainties of how to be a student in a new post-secondary landscape. The high school context did not provide participants with a foundation of skills or success. Common to the stories is a lack of motivation to learn in high school, an early struggle in college, and drive and perseverance in the process of becoming a college student. Although participants anchor much of their success to accessing resources such as the Disability Service Office and tutoring, stories do reflect self-agency of academic accomplishments. Abigail remarked on her attending class and achieving strong grades, “because I’m a good student.” Madeline’s narrative reflects positively on her self-determination to attend class and complete assignments during times when she is most affected by her mental
health. Rebecca, April, Lauren and Sophie narrated stories that demonstrate how proud they are of themselves for their accomplishments.

Student stories demonstrate a resistance to their high school story. Students compose a new story in post-secondary, one in which they are proactively acquiring skills that lead to a student identity and facilitate academic success, and one in which they are developing a sense of belonging.

**Becoming a student and a sense of belonging.**

“The feeling of inclusion is part of why I’ve been able to be successful, despite having kind of tricky circumstances.” (Madeline)

When speaking about becoming a student, participants encompassed the evolution of a sense of belonging. As participants came to know how to be a student, they described their feeling of group membership at the College. In their effort to learn how to be a student, participants asked questions, sought support, practised new skills such as working in groups and presenting in the classroom, and subsequently experienced various degrees of “fitting in”, comfort and acceptance. Stories strongly suggest that a sense of belonging enhanced the process of becoming a student and academic success.

More specifically, student stories speak of a sense of belonging impacting motivation, studying, attending classes, and overall learning. Madeline constructed a storyline whereby she achieved good grades and feels “super included”. Madeline twice remarked that she “looks forward to coming to school” and related the significance of belonging to academic motivation:

I think that it [belonging] helps you keep your motivation and your focus and helps you
prevent those self-destructive behaviours too that might be a little more natural sometimes for some people, me. They kind of just help buffer and that keeps you in a positive zone.

In conclusion, Madeline proclaimed that belonging is “super valuable.”

April, also very motivated in the post-secondary environment, spoke passionately about her process of becoming a student, “As I began to learn how to study, which is look at the work, reflect. All of that stuff I learned here has really been beneficial for me as a human being.” April, who is achieving academic success in her courses, continued, “I can be a student for life now because I enjoy the process of learning.” Regarding belonging, April expressed, ”I think it’s important because belonging gives you a sense of purpose.” Central to Madeline and April’s stories is the concept that belonging enhances a sense of purpose and motivation, which provides a positive foundation for learning. The desire for successful learning was not only highlighted by Madeline and April but is a common thread throughout all participants’ stories.

Similar to Madeline and April, Lauren and Rebecca are both succeeding at the College. Lauren spoke of learning how to be a student in relation to her early experience at the College where she was at risk of failing, “I knew there had to be a different solution and I cannot accept that fact that I had to quit a course or two. I had to figure out what I’m going to do to succeed.” In her process of learning how to study and how to utilize resources, Lauren feels “very, very included”. Despite her challenges, Lauren is learning effective study skills and is succeeding academically. Further in her storyline, Lauren revealed that because she experiences belongingness, she feels like a competent student, similar to her non-disabled peers. Importantly, Lauren feels accepted and that she has support to reach her academic goals. “I feel very accepted this way and I have been able to do most things that most students can.” Lauren
continued, “[Belonging means that] I can do what anybody else can do. It means that I have access to whatever I need to be able to be the student.”

For Rebecca, writing English essays and reading aloud in front of classmates were challenging. As she developed as a student, Rebecca became proficient in essay writing and significantly more confident, “… and in the end I got a 90 something in English. I was like, wow! I never thought I could have done that.” As Rebecca improved in her presentation skills, she experienced an enhanced sense of belonging in the classroom:

And even having to get up and read out a few times and that I felt just the openness in that class. I was able to do that. That was cool! I liked it a lot. So much that I was going to take it [the course] again and I didn’t even need to!

As Rebecca experienced belonging, her academic motivation increased. Rebecca narrated that this has “given me more drive and [I] apply myself.”

While Madeline, April, Lauren and Rebecca described a more solid sense of belonging at the College, William expressed an inconsistent experience of belonging. William described belonging as a “very foreign experience” and remarked, “I’m not sure I always recognize it until retrospectively.” A sense of belonging is, however, slowly developing for William, as he continues in his process of becoming a student. William conveyed he feels like an “outsider” but also indicated, “Every once in awhile, there is a context in which I feel like I belong here.”

William was hired by the Learning Skills Coordinator to be a peer tutor. William associated his sense of belonging with tutoring, which provides connection to others at the College and creates a feeling of being part of the student body. Inherent in William’s story as a peer tutor is the significance of “contribution” to his experience of belonging, “I get to contribute to something from what, who I am.” William attributed meaning to belonging, “it’s making me an asset to the
school rather than a deficiency.” William further reflected, “I feel like I belong when things that make me uniquely me become an asset not a deficit.”

William’s storyline emphasized the importance and acceptance of one’s own individual characteristics and strengths in the school community. William made the point of wanting to feel valued although he demonstrates differences in learning. Interestingly, when William eloquently articulated the significance he assigns to belonging, he chose language ("deficit", "asset") that reflects the medical model paradigm in which the College administration, faculty and staff operate.

Abigail also stressed the point of being valued despite differences. Abigail spoke to the fact that, although she has a learning disability, she is still very capable of successful learning and of contributing in class and in group work. Yet, Abigail, in the full-time nursing program, was not welcomed by her most of her peers when the nursing students were required to form working groups. Abigail described the stigma and discrimination she experienced:

I think that, because the old school nursing way is, kind of, someone with my disability would have never gone into nursing. So there’s that huge thing attached to people with learning disabilities and I could even tell with my classmates, that a lot of them didn’t want to work with me because I think they had fear that they wouldn’t do as well.

Abigail’s classmates assume Abigail’s contribution would negatively affect their grade because they perceived Abigail as having poor academic skills. However, Abigail, in her process of becoming a student, has earned strong grades by applying new studying and writing strategies. Poignantly, Abigail continued to share:

Well for me, in our program, we talk a lot about accepting others and accepting cultures and it’s like, okay, we can accept all these other cultures but it’s like it’s not just about
accepting cultures. It’s about accepting everybody no matter what their walk of life is. Sitting through that was sometimes unbearable because it’s like, you guys are all talking about accepting people, but you’re not. In a way you are, but you’re not. It just takes that step of okay, yes, of taking the risk and seeing how other people are when you work with them. You might be surprised.

Further, Abigail illustrated how a lack of belongingness has impacted her as a student, specifically her motivation to attend class:

Well, there was times I just didn’t want to go to class actually. There were some days I just wanted to skip class and I was like, this sounds like high school. I still went of course, because I’m a good student.

Abigail’s story speaks to the rhetoric of accessible values. Rather than acceptance, Abigail is ostracized as a student with learning differences in a medical program. Through her story, it becomes clear that the College’s stated value of “inclusivity” has not translated into an accepting educational environment for Abigail. Abigail conveyed her thoughts on belonging and related it to academics:

Well, I think a sense of belonging actually is when you feel like you belong. You work better and you excel even better in environments where you feel like you have a sense of belonging, because it takes that stress off.

Both William and Abigail highlighted the concept of “deficit” as it relates to disability. Common to William and Abigail’s “deficit” stories is the meaningful contribution they can make as students despite their differences in learning. Common to their stories is seeking a belongingness that includes acceptance of their differences so they can share who they truly are.
While Sophie also described feeling stigmatized at the College, she has nevertheless developed a sense of belonging on campus. Sophie described that other students would “like stare at me from the hallway to the seats to as far as they can”. Sophie, a student with a dislocated hip and connective tissue disease, attends the College as a part-time Business Administration student. Sophie shared that she questioned if she would be able to succeed as a student, “… it was really hard because I didn’t think I was going to be able to do it with my disability.” Sophie is often in pain, which interferes with her learning. Sophie has acquired effective study strategies and is academically successful. Having notes from classmates contributes to Sophie’s sense of acceptance and belonging. “…if I ever need notes, I have several people to go to for notes, which is really nice. They don’t have a single issue with it. They do it gracefully, they jump on it.” As Sophie’s sense of belonging strengthened her student identity, she became highly motivated to continue her path in higher education:

Okay, well, if I can do this then I can be there [university]. That’s kind of how I’m doing it now. If I can get through this program, I can get into university and if I can get into university, then I can get my CPA. I’m going to try and reach for it.

As a student, Sophie explained that belongingness means, “being part of the school” and she commented, “I am amazed at how well I’ve been able to fit in.”

Alice, a student with an informal diagnosis of a learning disability and also a hand injury, did not experience group membership or fitting in at the College. Alice, now in her second year as a part-time engineering student, narrated that her peers did not include her in part due to her age. At age 28, Alice is older than most of her 19 year old classmates. Alice also informed that her peers had strong connections with each other formed while attending the local high school
together. Alice reflected on what a sense of belonging means to her and how it affects the student role:

> It encourages you because there’s people you know that are going through the same things and have the same stress levels or the same concerns. They know exactly what you’re going through. So having somebody that knows exactly what you’re dealing with is really helpful. And I think you can probably help each other and that would be very beneficial, I think.

Inquiry into the meaning ascribed to belongingness imparts belonging as a dominant influence in relation to participants’ process of becoming a student. As most participants acquired new skills necessary to succeed academically, as they learned to be a student and become more assimilated into the student body, they began to experience belongingness. This sense of belonging in turn positively affected their development as a student and their academic motivation.

As Madeline developed her student identity she experienced increasing belongingness, which then strengthened her motivation to attend class and to study. “I’ve just had really good support and it’s just something to look forward to when I come to school.” Madeline applied her new student skills of organizing, time management and studying, and portrayed herself as “thriving”. Other participants also highlighted how experiencing belonging further motivated them in their student role. April felt very “welcomed”, and enthusiastically described how this encouraged her on her journey as a student. Identifying as a post-secondary student resulted in feelings of “fitting in” and in turn generated feelings of being capable of achieving academic goals. As William’s student identity evolved, he gradually experienced a sense of belonging in
some contexts. Importantly, William noted how experiencing belonging influenced his academic success as a student, “I do better in the classes I have a friend in”.

Student reflections on belonging illustrate the significant value it holds. Stories inform that feeling a sense of belonging helps students “work better”, “excel”, and “stress less”. Additionally, belonging “helps with academics” and gives more “confidence in learning” and “more drive”.

**Summary of narratives of becoming a student**

In summary, *narratives of becoming a student* represent stories of high school experiences, of learning student skills in post-secondary, and of the relationship of developing as a student to developing a sense of belonging. Acceptance and feeling group membership was found to influence motivation and academic performance. Stories also described how a lack of belongingness can adversely affect student motivation to the point of wanting to skip class.

**Narratives of Engagement**

Student stories suggest that engagement with others impact belongingness. These storylines specifically involve engagement with peers, faculty and staff.

**Narratives of engagement with peers.**

“My marks, my GPA, are primarily a function of…. my ability to talk with someone about the subject.” (William)

Narratives of engagement capture stories depicting relational interactions with peers and illustrate how these experiences influence participants’ sense of belonging. Stories illustrate that engaging with others in the classroom and on campus provides opportunity for connectedness. Meaningful interactions with peers foster a sense of belonging. Some participants also shared stories depicting negative peer interactions.
All students conveyed the importance of support from their peers to the development of a sense of belonging. Students narrated accounts of their experiences in a number of different spaces where they connect with peers, such as accessing help for assignments, being involved in group work, studying for exams, preparing oral presentations, and activities on campus. Many stories demonstrate that positive peer interactions improve motivation and learning, resulting in academic success.

While most students expressed positive engagement with peers, entrenched in Alice and Abigail’s stories is alienation from classmates, which subsequently led to a decreased sense of belonging. Alice, older (age 28) than most of her engineering cohort, expressed, “I don’t really have that many social experiences because I’m quite a bit older than the rest of the people in the school. I don’t think I really have that many social connections in this school.” Alice continued:

… I don’t know if it’s specific to my faculty of engineering, but I find that it’s pretty cliquey because everybody went to high school together and so they have all been helping each other, and they work on assignments together because that’s encouraged. But I’ve noticed that the people who haven’t gone to the high school with them, they aren’t really included in that as much.

As Alice did not feel part of the student group, she therefore that she used other resources, such as tutoring, to help with her assignments. Alice revealed:

I think it has negatively impacted me because everybody is able to share assignments and if they’re stuck on something, they’ll kind of compare whether they can help each other, and I’m not really part of that group. So, I’m not able to check anything that I’m questioning with them. So, that’s not really the best.
Feeling alienated has resulted in Alice withdrawing from engagement with her peers, “…I don’t really put the effort just because we aren’t on the same playing field I think.” Abigail, also alienated from her peers due to her learning disability, described her reaction, “Which was really kind of like, we’re adults, we’re not children anymore, we need to get over this.” Abigail attempted to cultivate meaningful connections with fellow students in her nursing cohort but was consistently shunned. Abigail and Alice’s stories of exclusion, each in a cohort program, affected their motivation to attend class. Alice reflected, “I think that if I were more part of the group here, it would make you feel like you wanted to go [to class].”

Conversely, Madeline’s storyline of inclusion and connection in the classroom creates the desire to attend class, “…I think everyone gets kind of burned out eventually and it makes a difference when you have something to look forward to when you go to class.” William’s story of belonging shifted from primarily a feeling of being disconnected from his peers in his first year to experiencing meaningful social interactions in his second year of college. William described his experiences with peers in second year, “Some of them [friends] I didn’t meet by being their tutor.” “This is the first time in the history of me being a student, that I have more than one friend at school.” William continued, “I sit and talk with my friends and eat lunch in the cafeteria, which I could never do before.” Cultivating friendships with peers and a deepening sense of belonging has had a positive impact on William’s schoolwork. William remarked, “learning is a social activity” and described that he is successful in courses “where I had someone be a friend or a tutee.” For William, his connection with others motivated him to learn, “My best subject, Math 100, the only reason I got through it was because this friend was meeting me…” Studying with a friend helped William stay “on pace and on time with the course.”
Both William and Rebecca specifically commented on how peers support them with class presentations. William communicated how he practised his presentations with a classmate, “… having said it once, when you’re not under pressure, makes it easier to say it the second time, when you’re under pressure.” Rebecca felt supported and accepted by her peers when she presented to the class:

I just hated it [talking in front of people]. That would just be presenting or reading a piece of paper. Then, today, we had to do one and I think, because I’ve had to do it so many times now, and being with people that understand and stuff. But now, it’s come where it’s front of people I don’t even know. So that’s really good.

In reference to her process of becoming a student, Rebecca noted, “I’ve learned that there’s lots of things I can change or do.” With regard to her sense of belonging, Rebecca shared, “I feel like I’m part of the student life.” Rebecca further described, “With the program I’m in, my peers are really understanding and that’s part of what we’re learning.” “People are more accepting and there’s not really that much judgment here.”

Madeline also experienced strong peer support and described the benefits of studying with a friend:

… we’ll go study with each other just because, like we won’t even study the same thing, obviously, because we’re in different courses, but it’s just enough to have someone there to keep you accountable and hold you responsible. You just make these relationships with people with similar goals and I think if they’re good enough relationships where you feel included, you support each other through.

This strong, supportive engagement with peers has increased Madeline’s academic motivation, “And honestly, I’ve made some really solid friendships here as well, which have proven to be
supportive in the fact that there are definitely times when I am exhausted and just kind of need that motivation.” Madeline noted that engaging with peers has helped her “succeed as a student”.

In her storyline, Sophie commented on both negative and positive experiences with peers in relation to her visible, physical disability:

… there [were] some people who kind of stared and judged me and were quite rude and then there was a lot of other people who were really nice. They never really looked at my disability. They looked at me as a person, which was really nice. They never really focused on it. They would ask how I was doing when they could tell I was having a bad day, but other than that they wouldn’t just focus on it all the time, which was really nice. Sophie emphasized the significance of asking supportive peers for help, indicating that it has made being a student “easier”. Sophie remarked, “So, it’s been nice to have the support. I probably could have done it but some of the girls here have made it so much easier because when I’m struggling, and they’re near, I’ll ask them for help.”

Similar to Sophie and Madeline, Rebecca is very satisfied with her social connections and with her academic progress. Both Sophie and Rebecca expressed that they questioned how they would progress in post-secondary. Sophie narrated:

…right before school started, I had a nervous breakdown. I was really scared. I thought I was going to be judged. I thought people were going to stare at me constantly. I really didn’t know if I was going to make it through it,

Rebecca described her apprehension, “… how am I going to do this? This is tough.” Rebecca expressed that she has overcome her concerns with peer support and commented:
Overall, it’s been really good and peers have been understanding. Academics is good. The course I’m in works really well with my needs and I can get help. My social life is good too. I have made lots of friends throughout, people who are in my program, people who aren’t in my program. Yeah, we went to the college ski night and different things like that - the basketball tournaments, hockey we went to see.

Sophie’s sense of belonging was enhanced in the context of friendship and sharing student experiences with peers. Sophie elucidated the importance of developing peer relationships for support during challenging academic times:

Last semester, my one friend, after we wrote our math, we were both stressed out about it. We both, before leaving to go home, since she lives in Redwood, I live in Stanwood, we just kind of hung out for a bit and we both got our stresses out and had a good hug. We did it like, don’t let it hold you back, at least we made it through.

Sophie further spoke to the value of peer relationships, not only because of the positive impact academically, but also for other issues beyond school, “Having friends, having people that can depend on you and come to you for help whenever they need, even if it’s advice for boy troubles or they just need to talk because they’re having a bad day.” Sophie continued, “Sometimes your family doesn’t cut it. You need that friend, that peer support.”

The positive outcome of engaging with peers is evident in Madeline’s story. Madeline commented on the impact of relationships on her academic performance:

Yeah, I think making a lot of the relationships I have and just having the support here, it was a good thing. And the relationships I’ve made with people here, have really supported me and helped me work through my mental health things, which I think has helped me be become a successful student.
Madeline continued, “I’ve made a lot of really substantial relationships here, like friendships. It’s been really good.” I think the relationships have been pretty substantial in me being able to succeed”. “I feel pretty darn included”.

In the same manner, April narrated positive engagement with peers and commented on what a sense of belonging means to her, “Belonging gives you support. Belonging gives you a shoulder to cry on, somebody to laugh with.” Rebecca enthusiastically portrayed how feeling a sense of belonging has increased her motivation and confidence to further engage with peers:

I think a sense of belonging means feeling like you are a part of the school. This is where you spend a lot of your time. You’re wanted here and you’re supported here, the way I see it at least. It’s probably given me more drive to get out there and meet more people and apply myself for sure. That’s a big one. If I was in my classes and I was really struggling and feeling put down or being judged or anything like that, I don’t think I would want to reach out and go to certain events or hang out in the Pit [central gathering area of the College] and just visit with people that I don’t even know or things like that. Gives me more confidence for sure.

Margarite shared how belonging has impacted her in her journey of becoming a student. A sense of belonging and “fitting in” helps Margarite with the work of being a student in nursing. The meaning of belonging for Margarite included feeling “comfortable” and this comfort level helps helped as a student in group learning. Now in her 3rd year of nursing, Margarite declared, “I’ve definitely found my kind of group of friends or people that I fit with better than others and that’s important, especially in my semester when there’s so much group work”. Margarite further described group membership, “I think a big thing of a sense of
belonging is just being comfortable and feeling included when you need to be and maybe creating space when you want to.”

In exploring the belonging perspectives of students with disabilities in relation to engagement with peers, I note that participants want to be recognized for who they are. Participants positioned themselves as individuals with diverse learning skills. Student stories clearly demonstrate that integration with peers impacts experiences of belonging. The stronger the participants connected with their peers, whether socially or academically, the more participants experienced a sense of belonging. Less connection with peers resulted in experiencing less belonging. Participants also narrated that positive engagement with peers, such as studying together, strengthened their development as a student. Furthermore, students clearly articulated that experiencing a sense of belonging is linked to their academic motivation and to their success in learning.

**Narrative of engagement with faculty/staff**

*Faculty are easy to talk to.* (Abigail)

All students narrated positive interactions with faculty and resources staff (disability services coordinator, learning skills coordinator, counsellors). Madeline, Sophie, April, Rebecca, Alice described the initiative they took to engage with faculty to help faculty understand their specific learning needs. Madeline remarked on her engagement with faculty to share her disability-related challenges:

I just kind of went there and told them this is who I am. This is what I’m trying to do. I want to do what I need to do to be successful and I’ll probably have some limitations and fall short sometimes, but I’m going to give it my best effort. From the start, everyone I met pretty much met me right where I was at, which was nice. I don’t think I’ve had any
problems with any of my instructors to be honest, that I can think of. Similarly, Sophie, Margarite, Abigail, and April commented on their positive interactions with faculty and staff. Sophie remarked that these interactions have resulted in feeling included and commented:

Everyone, like all the faculty, not just the teachers, but even the people at the front desk [Welcome Centre desk], anyone who really just sees me and knows I’m in pain - because I guess I just wear it on my face apparently - usually they’ll ask how I’m doing.

Sophie’s story continued, “So they’re great. All my teachers have been great. If I show up a little bit late or if I have to leave in the middle of class, they fully understand. Sophie further remarked, “…they always tell me, we can make it up another time. I can sit with you. Everyone is really accommodating. They understand I’m doing my best.” Sophie described that faculty go beyond their role of educators, “You can tell all the teachers care about the students. They're not just there to teach, they actually care about the students, so that makes it a lot better.”

Rebecca also narrated positive interactions with faculty. Rebecca described engaging with her Psychology instructor to inform him of her learning challenges:

I just pulled him aside and we ended up sitting out at the picnic tables and just chatting, and he helped me out and I saw it was really good. He took the time to sit with me out there and even though he has more than a hundred students.

Abigail’s connection with faculty is particularly significant, as she does not experience inclusion with her peers. Abigail described a solid connection with faculty, “I definitely feel that faculty is pretty good about including everyone. So they listen to everyone’s opinions…there’s definitely that piece they’ve done a really good job on.” Abigail formed strong relationships with instructors and with two disability service coordinators. Abigail noted:
A lot of the nursing teachers… really looked out for me. A lot of the nursing instructors were good. But still, it was a lot for them because it was something new for them, because they’ve never seen someone like me go through the program.

Further, Abigail related belongingness to being a student, “I think a sense of belonging actually is when you feel like you belong, you work better and you excel even better in environments where you feel like you have a sense of belonging, because it takes that stress off.”

Alice shared a similar story whereby she did not feel a sense of belonging with her peers but did experience connection and support from faculty. Alice described that this has impacted her as a student “… the teachers have been very inclusive…” Alice further stated, “… the staff here at [the College] is amazing. I think they genuinely want to see everybody succeed. That’s really nice and that’s definitely helped with my education.” Alice continued:

I was able to seek help from the disabilities staff here and it has helped wonders. It definitely contributed a lot to my success and I think without it, I probably would have been discouraged and maybe not have been where I am today.

Margarite voiced her thoughts regarding faculty at the College and stated, “Faculty is really supportive, and being in a small college, we’re lucky because they can get to know us on a personal level…” Likewise, April described feeling very supported by faculty, “Faculty was awesome. The faculty was amazing. They’ve made major, major in roads in my life. I’m sure they don’t even realize what they’ve done.”

Stories from William reflect inconsistent connection with faculty. William commented:

It varies dramatically between which faculty. Some are more understanding and some at least make an effort and some are more recalcitrant. So I don’t know if that the right word, some are more stuck in their ways. So it varies pretty greatly.
William further described,

Yeah, unfortunately much of my connection with instructors tends to boil down to explaining what went wrong and seeing if I can get extensions. But every once in a while I get to actually show an instructor what I’m good at. So I have a more positive relationship with the instructors in whose courses I managed to figure out how to succeed…I know from other staff that some of the staff, faculty included, liked to joke about me behind my back. I know just from the micro expressions in their face and for their word choice and so on that they don’t get it because they’ve never lived it and they tend to be dismissive. Some of the faculty have recognized that I’m good at what they’re teaching; I’m just not good at the student game.

William also noted:

So every once in a while I get to talk with a couple of the teachers about their subject or about mine and there’s some genuine interest and genuine exchange and that’s a good conversation rather than just what went wrong, how can we try to accommodate it.

Rebecca also experienced a faculty member who was unsupportive. Rebecca described one instructor who questioned an academic accommodation, “There was one teacher that didn’t quite get it…. she didn’t understand why I need to go and have my test read…”. Rebecca discussed her learning differences and her need to ask for clarification during tests. The instructor responded, “Well, you should write your tests in class!”

**Summary of narratives of engagement.**

In summary, narratives of engagement reveal positive interactions with at least one staff member, instructor, or peer at the College. Narrative accounts vary in depth of belonging experiences demonstrating individual differences among participants. Student stories reveal that
supportive interactions and forming relationships on campus advance the process of becoming a student and the development of a sense of belonging. Further, in many cases participants (Madeline, William, Margarite, Rebecca, Sophie) recognized how connecting and studying with peers *improves their learning*. This particular finding is significant for faculty to be aware of, as faculty are in a position to strengthen peer connections in the classroom, and in doing so, can enhance learning. April and Abigail described that their positive interactions with faculty shaped their overall sense of belonging and also facilitated their academic success. Overall, seven participants narrated a link between belonging and success in learning.

**Narratives of Barriers to Belonging**

“I wasn’t really able to participate…” *(Sophie)*

Narratives of barriers to belonging take the form of systemic barriers, physical/environmental barriers, and attitudinal barriers. Student stories describe obstacles that reduce opportunities and access to belonging.

Academic accommodations are typically provided for students whose disability creates a barrier to education. Academic accommodations, such textbooks in electronic format or extended time for exams, are implemented to reduce/eliminate any disability-related barrier, thus increasing access to education. All students in this study were eligible for, and utilized, technical and procedural academic accommodations. These accommodations, however, while increasing access to lecture material and placing students on a level playing field for exams, did not necessarily reduce or eliminate existing barriers to belonging.

Student stories note systemic, physical/environmental, and attitudinal barriers. These barriers to belonging will be described in detail to illustrate students’ restriction to opportunities to develop a sense of belonging.
Systemic barriers.

Systemic barriers are institutional policies and/or practices that unfairly discriminate resulting in the limitation of full and equal participation. For example, Sophie, who presents with physical challenges, was at risk of being excluded from social events on Orientation Day. Orientation Day is organized for the first day of college to connect students from all programs. Sophie was interested in the activities but was restricted from full inclusion and described:

During orientation at the very beginning they had ‘Fun Day’. I wasn’t really able to participate in much of that but I was able to go around and check out the different tables and what they had. Then they had a game of Bocce where I was able to explain to all the people who have never played. So that was really nice. I was able to participate in a game but it wasn’t too much.

In this circumstance, Sophie, just beginning her journey of becoming a student, was unable to share in the activities in the same manner as her peers because the institution does not consider students with physical challenges when planning activities for Orientation Day. Sophie’s chosen words, “I wasn’t really able to participate…” are significant. Sophie has academic access to the college, as her grades have earned her placement and presence in the business program. Yet, Sophie does not have full access to college-wide activities because they are designed for the “able-bodied” student. The institution therefore allows for presence, but has neglected to plan for full participation in college-wide activities for students with physical challenges. This demonstrates the contrast of “presence” and “participation” for students with disabilities. Access to education, which allows for presence on campus, does not necessarily equate to opportunity to participate. Opportunities to participate in on-campus activities, was
noted by other participants (Rebecca, Lauren, April) to contribute to their sense of inclusion and belonging.

Systemically, another obstacle for all students in this study is the segregated space in which they write tests. While extended time and a quiet place to write tests may be necessary academic accommodations to reduce disability-related barriers, students were faced with questions and judgment from peers. Alice articulated:

…it really resonated with me that I’m not part of everybody else’s group. Quite possibly, because, I mean, I do have to leave the classroom to do tests. Then, everybody is wondering where I go. People have asked me do you not write tests? That kind of stuff.

Similarly, Margarite commented:

I was a little bit concerned that they would notice and wonder why I was never there. I know at times it’s been, kind of, not really said to me but more mentioned or implied, that maybe I’m given special privilege because of having the disability.

Institutional policy that offers programs only on a full-time basis also has the potential to restrict participation for students with disabilities. Margarite and Abigail, both nursing students, did not have the option to take a part-time course load as the College only offers nursing on a full-time basis. Although both students have been academically successful throughout the program, they indicated that a full course load limited their involvement in college-wide activities. Abigail, who was not accepted by her peers in the nursing program, would have benefited from the opportunity to connect socially with other college students. Abigail commented, “I guess because of nursing school being so busy, I just kind of like, well, that stuff [college-wide activity] is cool but I can’t do that right now.” Margarite explained that she was not able to be involved in college social events:
…I’m into a more in-depth and life-consuming program. So, I would say that it wouldn’t have to do with any school for the social aspect. I don’t think it was any different than it would be anywhere else just based on my program. I was so busy. I didn’t make new friends or have that really bumping social life. It was more just because of school.

The demands of a rigorous, full-time program, while managing disability-related issues and accessing support, can be a systemic barrier to involvement in campus activities which facilitate belonging.

**Physical/environmental barriers.**

Physical barriers can be structural/manmade obstacles or elements in the environment, such as noise, that prevent or block mobility, or create difficulty in securing accessible seating. Environmental barriers are barriers that exist within the environment such as climate or noise. Sophie experienced barriers to participation during college-wide events because she was unable to sit comfortably for a sustained period of time. Sophie remarked, “…like in the hockey games and the dance. I didn’t want to go to the dance and the hockey game because the bleachers are way too uncomfortable. I can’t go…” Sophie’s story reveals reduced opportunities for social inclusion and belonging.

Lauren and William both narrated noise as a barrier due to disability-related sensitivities. William expressed:

Every once in a while there is a context in which I feel like I belong here but it tends to be that all the free events are noisy. Like the last two days I had to avoid and navigate around the Pit [student gathering space] because the audio volume was such that, by the time I got through the crowd, I would be in sensory overload. All the quiet events have a
ticket price and start after hours.

William further expressed, “I also just hack my way around a lot of barriers. Noise is a problem so I bought soundproof headphones and I figured how to look up un-booked classrooms and I will go find an un-booked classroom.”

In her narrative, Lauren remarked:

I’ve participated in the Get Connected event. There were times where it was way too noisy for me I had to get other people to get food for me so it was good that I went with other people. I had to use my headset and position myself in places where it wouldn’t be way too noisy for me even with my headset. There isn’t much you can do about an event like that for a person like me especially since it’s for everyone. I don’t think there are too many people with my disability so that I can’t see that they would change the whole event just for me.

The above narratives highlight how physical and environmental barriers at the College prevent students from full participation in belonging opportunities.

**Attitudinal barriers.**

Attitudinal barriers are behaviours, perceptions, and assumptions that discriminate against an individual with a disability and may include judging a person with a disability as inferior due to stereotypical beliefs. Attitudinal barriers may result from a lack of knowledge about disability. William, Abigail, Alice, Sophie experienced attitudinal insensitivity in their lived experience as a student at the College. Abigail discussed her challenges with negative attitudes from peers but explained, “I’ve been able to make it through the program even though it didn’t go the way I thought it would go. But that’s okay because I found ways to overcome
those barriers, I always do.” Abigail explained that she wanted to connect socially with her peers or other students outside of her program. Sophie commented, “There was some people who kind of stared and judged me and were quite rude…”

William’s story outlined both positive and negative attitudes from peers and faculty. In terms of classroom peers, William described:

The classroom cultures vary. I don’t really have a cohort because I am doing my own random miscellaneous selection of courses. In the classroom where I don’t have some predominant cohort that I’m in, like linear algebra, it was all the pre-engineer students and I wasn’t one of them and I was very ‘other’.

Summary of narratives of barriers to belonging.

To summarize, narratives of barriers to belonging, it is clear through student stories that systemic, physical/environmental and attitudinal barriers exist at the College, thwarting both the process of becoming a student and belonging. Narrative accounts describe stories of exclusion, where students were not able to participate with the “typical” college student body.

Recommendations From the Student Voice

Student narratives also include a variety of practical recommendations to enhance belonging in the post-secondary environment. In relation to lab partners, Alice remarked, “…I think that that probably would help if they [lab partners] were assigned [by instructors] because that would eliminate a lot of the ostracized feeling people get.” Sophie, upon reflection of her experience of limited opportunity to participate during Orientation Day, commented on comfortable seating for people with physical challenges and also suggested, “Maybe, Orientation Days, have something a little directed toward people who have limited [physical
ability]. So again, with the Bocce [ball game], maybe coming up with something else that they can do?”

Abigail emphasized providing disability education through campus Ted-Talks and remarked, “I think what you guys should do is get more people to talk about people [with disabilities] that are successful.” Madeline, through her lived experience with mental health challenges, encouraged others to reach out for help and to “work through it” to facilitate connection and belonging. Both Rebecca and Margarite endorsed the Early Alert, program which connects “at-risk” students to resources. Margarite informed, “I think the Early Alert was really important in my learning, so I would like to see that continue with other students….” Such practices and mechanisms, as suggested by participants, may increase participatory opportunities and create a platform to facilitate a sense of belonging.

Chapter Summary

“So I need to learn to function within a post-secondary context.” (William)

Inquiry into the experiences of belonging for students with disabilities and into the meanings ascribed to belonging imparts belonging as a dominant influence on learning. Seven students associated a sense of belonging with their success in learning. Captured in student stories is the theme of becoming a student and the intricate relationship with developing a sense of belonging. Participants, as they learned how to be a student, began to feel a sense of belonging. Acquiring student skills helped participants to feel part of the college community. In turn, experiencing belongingness facilitated students’ academic motivation and success.

Two further themes, narratives of engagement with peers/faculty/staff and narratives of barriers to belonging, were found to impact participants’ development of a sense of belonging. Six participants narrated consistent positive interactions with peers. Prior to conducting this
study, I held the assumption that students with disabilities would experience belonging with peers if they were enrolled in a cohort program, that is, that a cohort would facilitate a sense of belonging. However, there was no evidence for this in Abigail’s story. For four years Abigail attended class with the same group of students in the nursing program. Abigail reported that for four years she did not experience a sense of belonging with her peers. With regard to engagement with faculty, seven participants consistently felt a sense of belonging with faculty.

Stories illustrate systemic, physical, environmental and attitudinal barriers that discriminate which contribute to some students (Abigail, William, Sophie, Alice, Margarite) feeling as “other” and “not part” of the group.

Eight participants narrated a negative high school history. The stories of early scholastic experiences provide a context in which to better understand participants’ lived experience in post-secondary. In contrast to high school, each participant narrated some sense of connection and belonging at the College, whether with peers or faculty/staff. In contrast to high school, participants describe learning skills to becoming a student. These students resist the role they had in highschool and enrolled in post-secondary to move forward as successful students.

Further, some participants in this study offer suggestions of practices they feel will enhance a sense of belonging. Faculty involvement in fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom should also be considered, as stories relay that belonging impacts learning.

As I review the above findings, I note several key points:

- The participants in this study arrived at the College unclear as to how to construct their lives as a student in the post-secondary landscape.

- Learning and disability support was offered to all participants. Participants demonstrated agency and self-determination as they also independently sought assistance and
The participants in this study provided powerful stories which position the College to create an inspiring belonging-centred campus. The College has new knowledge to develop exciting policy and practice using the voice of students with disabilities, which will advance the College as a progressive institution cultivating a culture of belonging for all diverse learners.

To summarize, the salient findings of this study are:

1. With the exception of one student (Margarite), all participants entered the College lacking a foundation of academic success.

2. There was an uncertainty of how to be a student across all participants.

3. The students in this study enrolled in post-secondary, resisting prejudicial practices from highschool.

4. As participants came to know how to be a student, they experienced feelings of “fitting in”. This connection and acceptance led to feeling a sense of belonging, which then influenced academic motivation and learning.

5. Positive engagement with peers/faculty/staff can positively impact a sense of belonging.

6. Systemic, physical, environmental, and attitudinal barriers can negatively impact a sense of belonging.

7. Although some students in this study express feeling as “other” and although I have heard faculty comments which clearly reflect insensitive and unaccepting attitudes, the students in this study demonstrate perseverance and resilience as they move forward on their post-secondary journey. Not only do the students resist their old highschool story of exclusion
and failure, they resist unaccepting attitudes and barriers in the post-secondary environment. In their new post-secondary lives, they compose a new story of intentionally forming a student identity, experiencing a sense of belonging, and being academically successful.

8. Participants attach meaning to belongingness. For participants, experiencing a sense of belonging is highly significant and very “valuable”.

9. Since student voices impart that belonging is meaningful to them, and that it impacts their learning, the College stakeholders can use this powerful information to create a highly inclusive and dynamic campus that values diversity, that represents a belonging-centered culture. Student stories offer hope that the College will listen to their voices and intentionally strengthen their sense of belonging. Student stories offer hope to imagine the College as an outstanding institution where belonging opportunities and relationships replace prejudicial attitudes and practices. The rich, in-depth narratives of belonging leave the College poised with possibility for enriching belonging for all diverse students.
Chapter 6 Discussion

Introduction

Disability scholar, Michael Oliver (1996), suggested that disability research be based on the voices of disabled people in an effort to improve their circumstances. Creswell (2013) explained that an individual’s story is one reflection of their identity. Smith and Sparks (2008) wrote, “We organize our experiences into narratives and assign meaning to them through storytelling. Narratives thereby constitute and construct our realities and modes of being.” (p. 18). Creswell (2013) also spoke of the construction of reality through stories and indicated that it is through these socially constructed stories that we can glean a more nuanced understanding of one’s experience. In this study, I listened to the stories of students with disabilities, voices that are rarely heard, to learn about their experiences of belonging and to understand the meaning students ascribe to belonging in the landscape of post-secondary education.

This study investigated the following questions:
1. What stories do students with disabilities tell about a sense of belonging?
2. What do students with disabilities say about the significance of a sense of belonging in their overall post-secondary experience?

In examining and interpreting student stories, I drew from a variety of identity theories; Erikson’s (1968) theory of identity, multiple identity theory, and intersectionality. Erikson’s identity theory provides a framework from which to understand an individual’s social identity, which Erikson describes as created in response to society. An individual with a disability may be rendered less worthy due to devalued social roles, resulting in greater vulnerability to isolation and marginalization. The more recent concepts of a multiple-dimensional identity and
the intersection of multiple identities were also used to guide the interpretation of data in this study.

In addition, I drew from critical disability theory. To expand on the description of CDT in Chapter 2, this theoretical framework explores disability-related issues from a socio-cultural perspective, questioning societal norms, biases, beliefs, and practices that create and maintain oppression and discrimination (Barton, 2001; Davis, 2002; Goodley, 2013; Pothier & Devlin, 2006). I integrated identity theories with CDT in order to apply the nuances and interrelationship of these lenses to my interpretation of the complex, multifaceted stories of belonging and student identity.

In this chapter, I will discuss my analysis of the findings in relation to the research questions. To begin, I will examine the stories students shared relative to their process of becoming a student and the process of developing a sense of belonging. Next, I will reflect upon the factors significantly impacting belongingness relative to engagement with others and barriers to belonging. I will consider the compelling meanings that belonging holds for students with disabilities and propose the inclusion of disability at the College as part of a diversity framework. I conclude by offering a new multifaceted theoretical lens in which to examine disability, student identity, and belonging in the post-secondary environment.

**Becoming and Belonging**

“[I am]... figuring it out through how to be a student...” (Madeline)

In this study, the findings reveal that students expressed stories of belonging in relation to their process of becoming a student. I interpret this *becoming* as the process of *developing a student identity*. Common to all participants’ stories was a lack of a student identity, an unknowingness of how to be a student in high school. I further interpret that, grounded in the
participants’ developing student identity, a sense of belonging began to emerge. That is, participants needed to acquire student competencies prior to experiencing belongingness on campus. This process of developing a student identity, therefore, is foundational to a sense of belonging.

Moreover, I represent the development of a student identity as dynamic and reciprocal in relation to the development of a sense of belonging. A continuous, evolving student identity enhanced participants’ belongingness. Experiencing an increased sense of belonging strengthened participants’ motivation to attend class and to study and positively influenced their identity as a student. This analysis is similar to Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, and Newman’s (2015) portrayal of disabled students’ narratives. Vaccaro et al. (2015) discovered that mastering the student role improved students’ sense of belonging and was interdependently related to belonging. Mastering the student role included such accomplishments as learning how to study, writing tests, and achieving good grades. Vaccaro et al. (2015) reported their participants "described the importance of successfully mastering various demands of the role of college student in order to feel a sense of belonging on campus.” (p. 679). Likewise, I found that acquiring student skills and the process of what I depict to be developing a student identity, was necessary for, and interconnected with, the participants’ emerging sense of belonging.

Also in sync with Vaccaro et al.’s (2015) work, stories in this study revealed that the development of a student identity involved acquiring new study skills, managing various academic tasks, and connecting with others as a student. In doing so, the participants were academically successful. The analysis of findings in this study, in addition to Vaccaro et al’s (2015) work, offer new knowledge to the issue of belongingness for post-secondary students with disabilities as they highlight the significance of a student identity to experiencing belonging.
There is very little research regarding the relationship between the processes of becoming a student and developing a sense of belonging. While other research emphasizes only factors impacting belonging, this research highlights the process of belonging and its interwoven relationship with becoming a student. Discovering that the development of a student identity for the participants was intricately and reciprocally related to their development of a sense of belonging calls attention to the significant role student identity plays for disabled learners. Interestingly, as I interpret the data from my study, I see the parallel between the construct of disability as complex, slippery and messy (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009) and students’ process of becoming and belonging. Further, the data shows that experiencing a sense of belonging impacts learning. In summary, becoming a student is an important determinant in the participants’ transformation to belonging and to their academic success.

As noted in Chapter 5, participants (William, Alice, Madeline, Margarite) described their development of becoming a student as a “work in progress”. Stories told represent the on-going, dynamic process of becoming and belonging; the messy, complicated processes that changes contextually and temporally, as does the disability experience. I believe the knowledge garnered from this study in relation to becoming and belonging can provide strong direction to higher education stakeholders committed to enhancing belonging experiences for students with disabilities.

Voices of confidence.

“I feel more comfortable now because I feel better about myself... everybody around is welcoming...” (April)

Learning new skills such as note taking, organizing, time management, studying, essay writing, presenting, accessing resources and conducting research, provided the context in which
participants developed and solidified a student identity. Each participant was an active agent in the construction of his/her student identity, intentionally seeking assistance to acquire student skills and experimenting with different learning strategies in their efforts to be academically successful.

As participants’ student identity emerged, they began to believe in their own capacity as a student. External sources provided services and supports, but interpretation of the data reveals that participants gained confidence and were ultimately the agents of their own success. As noted earlier in Chapter 5, Rebecca, Margarite, Sophie, and April narrated growing confidence. Further, Madeline, Rebecca, Alice, Lauren and William gained confidence and proactively approached faculty to discuss their learning. Participants also demonstrated self-agency as they initiated connections with resource professionals and peers to master new skills. Abigail, although she felt the isolation from peers was “unbearable”, displayed confidence in her abilities as a student and with determination refused to skip class. William’s narrative illustrates emerging confidence as he reflected on his academic accomplishments and social connections. Sophie commented that she is still herself although is recently disabled as an adult. Abigail, April, Rebecca, Madeline, Margarite and Sophie’s narratives reflect a strong sense of self emerging through their years at College. I interpret the confidence participants developed, and its impact on their identity as a student, as an important determinant of the their successful academic journey. Thus, the College can use this knowledge to create initiatives that build confidence and strengthen student identity for disabled students in their efforts to foster belonging.

It was not only the accomplishment of certain academic tasks that advanced student identity. Student identity was also advanced when participants felt part of the general student
body and felt as though they “fit in” with their peers. For example, Sophie remarked that she and her peers would hang out and it “helps you get through…” Lauren commented, “I just feel like I’m a part of the whole scene here.” Interpretively, becoming a student, therefore, is also about sharing everyday student experiences. These shared experiences resulted in participants feeling “very included”.

Likewise, in their work, Vaccaro et al. (2015) found that experiencing a sense of belonging gave students with disabilities more confidence to “do college” (p. 683). These authors describe that mastering the student role also meant, “feeling like a college student” (p.679) and “blending in with peers” (p.679). O’Keefe (2013) also linked a sense of belonging to increased levels of confidence in his exploration of disability as a risk factor to higher education attrition. Additional studies (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012), although not conducted with disabled students, similarly report an association between confidence as a student and a sense of belonging. The storied data in this study reflects feelings of growing competence in an identity as a student, which is valuable knowledge for higher education stakeholders to consider in their efforts to create belongingness on campus for students with disabilities.

**Summary of becoming and belonging.**

In summary, I came to understand that becoming a student for the participants was acquiring a new identity, an identity of someone who is capable of succeeding academically and fitting in with peers. Student narratives suggest that the more effective participants were as a student, the more they felt a sense of belonging; the more participants felt like they blended in with their peers, the more they felt group membership and belonging. This integration into the larger student body of the College solidified their new student identity.

Narrative accounts reveal both *becoming* and *belonging*. I propose that developing a
student identity in higher education is critical to belongingness for students with disabilities. This study demonstrates not only the importance of student identity to belongingness, but also how the process of constructing this new identity is reciprocal in nature with developing a sense of belonging. There is a significant intersection between the two processes, where each influences the other. I also draw from the data that a student identity and a sense of belonging are dynamic processes, on-going and changing.

Furthermore, narrative accounts support the notion that students cannot experience belonging without first becoming a student. Grounded in this becoming, the participants began to experience belonging. In light of this knowledge, I submit that resource professionals, faculty and administrators pay close attention to the formation of a student identity for students with disabilities in their efforts to foster a sense of belonging.

Voices of Identity: Socially Constructed, Multiple, Intersectional

Identity as socially constructed.

“It was really nice to be part of the students and they’re not looking at me because I have a disability. It was really nice.” (Sophie)

Considering that student identity is central to belonging, exploring identity through various theoretical frameworks will deepen an understanding of its relationship to belonging for post-secondary students with disabilities. Erikson’s (1968) theory of identity posits both a core personal identity and a social identity. Just as students voiced their formation of a student identity as on-going rather than static, Erikson also represented the development of identity as iterative and dynamic. It is important to note, when viewing narratives through the lens of Erikson’s theory, that identity formation is dependent on context and socially constructed, formed in response to society. Many authors have acknowledged disability as a socially
constructed category subjected to discrimination (Barnartt, 2013; Barton, 2001; Linton, 1998; Oliver, 1996; Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Social and educational experiences in a post-secondary environment can therefore shape a person's identity.

Erikson’s framework offers assumptions associated with the basic human need of belonging; that is, a strong identity can be developed when a person feels part of a group with a common set of values and when a person feels their own sense of self within this group. The person's ability to negotiate their membership in a group means that their identity is open to change and adaptation. Obtaining membership to a particular group can bring feelings of identity, inclusion and belonging.

As noted earlier, Erikson’s theory (1968) provides an excellent foundation for the understanding of identity evolving as a socially and actively constructed concept but it does not take into account that individuals, in their complexity, carry multiple identities. For students with disabilities that are cultivating a new student identity, it is imperative to be cognizant of other identities that may affect their sense of belonging. Other identities may be associated with age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, or religion. This concept of multiple identities will be reviewed as a lens in which to examine student narratives.

Identity as Multiple

“It’s hard to be a success in school as a parent.” (Madeline)

Scholarship describes the social construction of a multi-dimensional identity, which emphasizes the fluidity of multiple identities within a socio-cultural and socio-political context (Jones & McEwan, 2000). In this work, Strayhorn (2012) recognized that multiple identity categories shape experiences of disadvantage in the post secondary environment. Participants’ lives as a student are embedded with other identities. In light of this concept of multiple
identities, I will outline social categories highlighted in participants’ stories as well as explore if participants incorporate disability as a salient category of identity. In terms of ethnicity and race, all participants are white with the exception of Madeline, who is white and shares Indigenous roots. The use of the multiple identity theory can contribute to an overall understanding of belonging in higher education.

April is female, Christian, a mature student (52 years old), and was diagnosed with ADHD. April described her recognition of being a mature student and how this actually contributed to her feelings of inclusion on campus:

One thing, being older was kind of neat because it’s more common now – you don’t feel so much that you’re out of place or whatever. So that was kind of nice to have people that were going through the same sort of stuff. So you could speak to somebody who understood and could give you advice or give their opinion or whatever.

April’s narrative reflects initial concern over her strong Christian identity colliding with other ideologies presented in her health and human services courses. April described being pleasantly surprised when she felt support from faculty rather than discrimination, contributing to her sense of belonging at the College. April shared:

…because I have quite a religious background. When I came to the college, again, I thought it was “Get away religious! Religious! We don’t want to hear it! We don’t want to hear it!” And I’m amazed at, again, my assumption, because that’s what you assume higher education was doing. But it was the exact opposite. I found I was getting some support in my Christianity which I thought was really good.
April’s storyline reflects a strong sense of belonging at the College. In terms of her disability diagnosis, April recognized that ADHD is part of who she is but is not a primary facet of her overall identity.

Similarly, as noted in Chapter 5, Lauren narrated a strong sense of belonging at the College. Lauren, attending a predominantly female Health and Human Services program, recognized her disability as a significant part of her identity. In relation to her student identity, Lauren narrated a concerted effort to be academically successful, “…and because I was successful [as a student] before [having a disability] - and I’ve had to learn how to accept the new me. But at the same time, I’m not going to let that limit me. I’m going to try to be as successful as I was before my disabilities.”

In Alice’s storyline, it is evident that she perceives herself as someone with challenges. Alice described her experience as a student with a disability, “I think maybe it was more negative than positive to be honest.” Alice’s story continued on the issue of stigma in relation to writing tests in a separate location from her peers, “I mean … I do have to leave the classroom to do tests. Then everybody is wondering where I go”. Not only did Alice identify as an individual with a disability, but she is also a mature student and a female. Alice’s experience at the College did not include a sense of belonging. Alice attributed her isolation to age difference, being 28 years old in a cohort of 18-19 year olds who attended the College immediately following highschool graduation. In consideration of Alice’s multiple identities, it is also important to reiterate that Alice is a female in a program at the College that is primarily attended by male students, engineering. In this narrative, it is clear that identity categories, other than disability, may influence a student’s sense of belonging. This knowledge carries broader implications for changes in policy and best practice within the institution as it relates to cultivating belonging.
In her narrative, Madeline spoke of her identity as a mom, a single parent, and a student with a disability. Madeline provided insight into her identity as a mom and its unique impact on her role as a student,

The big thing was being a mom, but I’m not sure it was a barrier because it was actually something that makes me have to be a better student… but it was harder to juggle that and sleep deprived and everything - was not a good time.

Madeline discussed how being a mom meant she had less time to socialize with her peers on campus, which could potentially influence belongingness, “As a single parent, you’re isolated a lot.”

William disclosed his identification with the social category of lower socio-economic status, “I come from an impoverished family…” . William expressed that his financial circumstances have denied him from attending student activities associated with a fee, which he feels had an impact on belongingness:

All the quiet events have a ticket price and start after hours, which means I can’t be here on two accounts. One, I can’t get here and two, even if I could, I couldn’t pay my way in because as it is, I don’t have enough money to carry me through to September.

The multiple and various identity categories of participants remind us to consider how the experience of belonging is informed by identities other than disability.

It is evident that a multiple identity approach offers a broader perspective when examining belonging in higher education. The acknowledgment of multiple identities is “vital to understanding the experience of the individual” (Hallett, 2015, p. 156). Each category of identity has the potential to impact belonging in a different way. Multiple identities are important to acknowledge when examining students’ overall inclusion experience in higher education.
However, recognizing that disability is just one of many categories that make up a student’s overall identity may not be enough when thoroughly examining students’ experience of belonging. While the multiple identity experience of discrimination differs from the experience resulting from a single identity (Hallett, 2015), it assumes an additive or cumulative experience of exclusion rather than considering a more complex, multifaceted relationship between identity categories. Based on this limitation, it is worthwhile to examine another approach to identity, the theoretical construct of intersectionality.

**Identity as intersectional.**

“*Students are more than their disability.*” (Vaccaro, A. & Kimball, E., 2017)

As noted in Chapter 2, the construct of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989). The interlocking of multiple minority identities can produce disadvantage and discrimination that is more than simply additive or culmulative (Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Intersectionality offers an innovative approach to examine disability identity and “has been used to attempt to understand and describe the racialised, gendered or aged disability experience” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 62).

As identities are layered and complex (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), this broader intersectionality lens provides a unique approach to understanding the post-secondary experience for students with disabilities. Questions arise, such as how is the development of a student identity and of belonging informed by the interlocking of each identity category? Riddell et al. (2001) explained there could be a complex milieu of identity issues when intersected with other identities. Strayhorn (2012) noted, “quite often social identities intersect in new and different ways to form relatively unique social realities for students which in turn may require very different tactics for encouraging students’ belonging” (p. 71).
When viewing narrative data through the intersectionality framework, I pay attention to stories that reflect the complex intersection of student identity, disability identity, and other social group categories affecting an experience of exclusion or disadvantage. I pay attention to intersections to better understand the participant’s social reality because, as Vaccaro and Kimball (2017) argue, “…students with multiple identities (e.g. queer students with disabilities, women of color with disabilities) may experience college differently than students with disabilities with privileged social identities (e.g. heterosexual, white men with disabilities).” (p. 140).

William narrated disability as a salient category of identity. William’s interlocking identities of disability and lower socio-economic status reduced his opportunities for inclusion. Further, William described his sensitivity to noise and therefore can only attend “quiet” events. The quiet events on campus require a paid ticket restricting his participation. Alternatively, William’s male status intersecting with his disability may contribute to a positive belonging experience in some circumstances. For example, William narrated that he felt more belonging in his psychology class, which is populated primarily by female Health and Human Service Program students. “My psychology tends to be more fun, more interesting. I don’t know why. Maybe it’s the people that take it. A bunch of social workers and CCSW’s.[classroom and community support worker students].” Alice distinctly narrated disadvantage in terms of belonging with her interlocking identities of mature student, female, and disabled within a predominantly male, young (18-19 year olds) and small (12 students) engineering cohort.

In examining narratives through an intersectionality lens, I remain cognizant that disability identity is, as Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) noted, “contextual, fluid, multiple and intersecting”. Intersectionality reminds us that students with disabilities are
multidimensional with varying identities, some more salient than others (Darling, 2013). Each social category interacts with others in complex ways:

…a person may be White, male, and have a learning disability… his Whiteness and maleness cannot be disregarded as they provide a certain amount of privilege. These characteristic interact to give the person a certain amount of status, and that status can vary depending on whether the individual is a student in a classroom, an athlete on the field, or a consumer in a shop. (Yukenis & Bernstein, 2017, p. 5).

A person with a disability, who is also a member of other categories of devalued groups “must contend with greater oppression and more stereotyping than those who are “only” disabled”. (Darling, 2013, p. 66).

The lens of intersectionality also allows for addressing disability as one form of student diversity. In their work, Kim and Aquino (2017) asserted, “the theory of intersectionality establishes the vital junctures that bridge disability and diversity, and promotes the identification of multiple diversity memberships.” (p. xii). I align with Kim and Aquino’s (2017) move to conceptualize disability as diversity within an intersectional framework in the examination of “the role of disability in overall identity formation, self-perception, and success in college.” (p. xii).

In this study, it is important to be aware that each participant, as they composed a new student identity in the unfamiliar landscape of post-secondary, holds various identities; some more salient than others and some as a devalued social identity. There is a layered, complex intersection of multiple social categories, which enhances an understanding of the relationship between student identity, disability identity, and a sense of belonging.
Voices of Student Identity

“I’m just not good at the student game.” (William)

Amongst their multiple intersecting identities, each participant actively created their new life as a student, a new student identity. At the time of this research, each participant had developed a strong student identity, with the exception of William. Although academically successful, William’s story reflects less stability in his student identity. William exclaimed, “I’m not sure what it means to be a student, but I’m less freaked out with the idea of being here than I used to be.” William has made friends whom he enjoys studying with. However, he shared he feels, “Out of place here. I still don’t know how to take on a full course load. I still don’t know how to connect with a classmate.” William’s development of a sense of belonging paralleled his development of a student identity; experiencing both in fits and starts.

Voices of Disability Identity

“I wouldn’t say it’s [disability] a huge piece of me.” (Sophie)

Common to all narratives is the thread that participants want to be recognized and valued as a legitimate student whether they hold disability as a salient identity category or not. I drew from the data that participants want to maintain agency and embody the student role. Some students in this study did not ascribe disability as one of their multiple identities. Kimball, Friedensen, and Silva (2017) also discovered variation in the salience of disability as an identity category in their qualitative study involving eight post-secondary students with learning disabilities. Other authors have noted that students, for various reasons, do not acknowledge disability as an aspect of their identity (Kendell, 2016; Shakespeare, 2006).

Overall, participants in my research have positioned themselves as a student, narrating stories of academic success whilst managing their disability. Margarite explained:
When I think of myself I don’t think of myself as somebody with a disability. I know anxiety is just a part of another challenge that you have to deal with going through all these different classes and everything. I think as I learn to cope with it, it’s just kind of become something of who I am and not something that defines me.

Characterizing her acquired physical disability, Sophie expressed, “I wouldn’t say it’s a huge piece of me.” For Margarite and Sophie, the deficit label of ‘disability’ does not reflect a primary aspect of their identity. They have forged an identity apart from their disability.

Other students (Abigail, Madeline, Lauren, Rebecca, April, William) did ascribe disability as part of their overall identity. Although these students perceive themselves as a person with a disability, they move forward to reach their academic goals. Students described themselves as unique individuals, capable of contributing within their own diverse identity. Lauren articulated, “I don’t really care whether anybody knows I have a disability or not because that’s just me”. In her narrative, Rebecca shared, “Well, last semester I had to really own that I had a learning disability… So now I’ve learned that it’s part of me and that it’s not a bad thing.”

When describing her experience in initiating engagement with faculty, Madeline explained,

I just kind of went there and told them this is who I am, this is what I’m trying to do. I want to do what I need to do to be successful and I’ll probably have some limitations and fall short sometimes but I’m going to give it my best effort.

April identifies with her disability, ADHD, but does not perceive this diagnosis as negative, “I have no problem with the ADHD”. In contrast to April, Abigail, diagnosed with a learning disability, resisted disclosing her learning disability diagnosis for fear of discrimination. Abigail remarked:
I guess when you know you have a learning disability you don’t want to tell people. There’s still that stigma attached and I haven’t actually told a lot of people until up to yesterday. People I know outside of school because most people would never know.

Seeing who I am, you can’t tell. But there’s still that huge piece of, oh, if I tell, they’re going to think different and it’s still like that.

It is important for administrators, faculty and staff to realize the impact of stigma on a student’s construction of their overall identity. College and university students with disabilities “make meaning of their self and identity” amidst messages of stigma (Vacarro & Kimball, 2017, p.147). In Weeber’s (2004) research (as cited in Aquino, Alhaddab & Kim, 2017), he found that an unsupportive campus climate for students with disabilities may contribute to disability as an “undesirable factor” in their overall identity.

Disability as an identity category was advanced through the social model of disability. The emergence of the social model shifted the historical focus of disability as located within an individual to a common identity generated by societal discrimination. Barnes and Mercer (2001) described this common identity as "membership of an oppressed or marginalized group extolling its virtues" (p. 525). This common voice can seek to dismantle societal barriers (Barnes & Mercer, 2001) and can be an empowering identity.

The disability rights movement, as described earlier in Chapter 4, advanced the social model and thereby provided the opportunity for individuals with disabilities to reconstruct more “positive definitions of themselves and their disabilities…” (Darling, 2013, p. 83). However, as Morrow (2004), in her review of identity politics and disability studies indicated, there are risks involved with the use of an identity-based conceptualization of disability. Identity politics risks “reifying identity categories that might better be contested, creating hierarchies of disability, and
fostering antagonism with other minority groups.” Although a common identity can serve to raise political awareness, other scholars have expressed criticism with a political disability identity, one that ignores illness and therefore can be considered exclusionary (Darling, 2013; Davis, 2002; Tremain, 2006).

Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009), in their review of Corker’s (1998,1999) work, outlined Corker’s concern that the social model does not account for cultural/social changes or for “contextual fluidity of identity formations” (p. 56). Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) warned that a collective identity based on exclusion, stigma and discrimination may not serve disabled people because it presents the perspective of victim, which may not be the most effective approach for societal change.

Furthermore, while a distinct disability category allows for group recognition, there is concern in the literature, of which I agree, that a collective identity interferes with integration of difference within society (Davis, 2013; Man Ling Lee, 2006; Shakespeare, 2014). Due to the complex nature of disability, scholars argue that disability cannot necessarily be assigned as a fixed category of identity (Davis, 2013; Linton, 1998; Shakespeare, 2014).

I question the existence of disability as a fixed identity category due to the enormous variation in cause, onset, severity, and functional impact. Disability is fluid, can be hidden or visible, and is contextually and temporally variable (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Students with the same diagnosis may experience disability quite differently from each other (Pena, Stapleton, & Schaffer, 2016).

Participants in this study captured the variation and flux of disability and its effects on their role as a student. Sophie narrated her diversified school experience depending on her symptoms, where some days are a “struggle” as a student and “other days, when I’m not too bad,
I can do pretty good.” In her story, Madeline shared, “It’s [school] actually not that hard when I’m feeling good to just go to class and do the work” but when Madeline “hit[s] depressive lows” she would “skip” classes. Disability is heterogeneous and multiple expressions and meanings of disability identity exist (Darling, 2013).

**Impairment**

While I agree with the social construction of disability, I also agree with disability theorists who argue that the disadvantages accompanying disability are not only the result of social barriers (Shakespeare, 2006). There may be disadvantage of a physiological and or psychological nature. Scholars who argue that disability is primarily a social phenomenon fail to adequately consider the very real physiological and psychological effects of disability. Shakespeare (2006) asserted, “The social model so strongly disowns individual and medical approaches, that it risks implying that impairment is not a problem.” (p. 200). People can indeed be disabled by their bodies. Theorizing disability as a social condition does not explain the complexity of both individual and environmental factors in the real lived experience of people with disabilities. Impairment (the individual’s medical condition) does not result from a socially restricted environment and yet impairment holds many consequences such as pain, fatigue, and emotional effects. Malhotra and Rowe (2014), while acknowledging that the social model has been effective in shifting the focus of disability from a biomedical framework, call for a re-framing of the social model of disablement to incorporate impairment. Shakespeare and Watson (2002) argued “…the social model ignores the ways in which people, their bodies, their multiple identities and experiences are constantly interacting with the environment around them which necessitates new models that consider these multiple dimensions of being” (as cited in Hadley, Hsu, Addison & Talbot, 2017, p. 183).
Moreover, the social model, in its argument for a distinction between impairment and disability, adopts a binary conceptualization of disability (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Shildrick, 2012). This binary thinking (impairment/disability; able/disabled) perpetuates a “deficit” value-based system rather than a focus on diversity.

Impairment cannot be ignored. Sophie’s narrative holds stories of fatigue and physical hip and back pain. In her student lived experience, Sophie is also restricted by her numerous long-distance trips to medical professionals to receive treatment. Sophie described how her impairment interferes with her role as a student; attending class, taking notes, and studying:

Like some days, it’s really hard to just try and sit through a class and actually concentrate and focus on what’s being said because I’ll be in so much pain. Where I’m constantly shifting trying to find a comfortable position where I can somewhat focus.

Lauren also summarized the effects of her impairment (brain and spinal injury) on her role as a student, sitting in a 3 hour lecture:

Well, sometimes I get worn out because of the pain…. However, by the time I’m done I have had so much stimulation sometimes from the cold temperature in the room, sometimes from just the interaction and the stimulation for my brain to think for that long and it’s good, but I get worn out. I feel like I just have to run away. I have to run away and hide.

Madeline’s clinical depression and anxiety often result in effects that hinder her focus, attention and motivation to attend class. Madeline narrated, “Anxiety sucks, so that’s hard and when I hit depressive lows – that can be really hard too, because of the motivation.”

A student living with impairment may have a markedly different experience of belonging from another if their disability does not result in pain, fatigue, or emotional effects.
Conceptualizing disability as the construction of both societal barriers and biological differences offers a more realistic framework for examining the experiences of students with disabilities. In order to thoroughly examine narratives and both these differences, critical disability theory will be utilized as another lens to analyze the participants’ stories.

**Voices through a Critical Disability Lens**

“I think a lot of people need to realize that even though someone has a learning disability, it doesn’t mean they aren’t capable of doing the same things as other people.” (Abigail)

**Critical disability theory.**

Incorporating both societal and biological barriers, critical disability theory provides an alternate approach to perceiving disability. CDT considers the impact of the intersection of multiple social identities in its critical examination of how institutions, language, attitudes, politics and the law disable and oppress individuals. CDT excavates and analyzes hegemonic ideas of disability, questions “normal” as it is defined relative to the able-body, and contests accepted norms regarding ability and participation within societal systems of inequality (Barton, 2001; Davis, 2002; Goodley, 2013; Linton, 1998; Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Resisting the dominant discourse of normalcy, CDT opens the way to analyze, discover, and imagine new ways of thinking about disability through the voice of the person with a disability. CDT therefore provides a useful lens for exploring student narratives of becoming and belonging. I will explain the data through the CDT lens and highlight existing power differentials and the influence of the medical model which has been adopted and embedded within the College.

**Stories of ‘normalcy’.**

“I have seven of those freaks in my class.” (Instructor, the College)
In William’s narrative, he labeled himself as “weird”, reflecting years of stigma and the impact of negative societal views regarding disability. Incorporated in William’s story was feeling more accepted in his psychology class, which is attended primarily by students in Health and Human Services programs. William stated, “Something about people who decide they’re going to spend their lives helping weird people get along with normal people, and vice versa, makes it a little bit more welcoming for a weird person, such as myself.” William, although beginning to experience belonging in an educational setting for the first time, perceives himself within the normal/abnormal binary paradigm. I believe this significantly influences his development of a student identity and a sense of belonging. William perceives himself through the lens of stigma and has constructed a disability identity as such. In terms of identity, stigma “continues to be a potent force in the shaping of identity among many, or even most, individuals with disabilities in modern society” (Darling, 2013, p. 155). Viewing William’s narrative through the lens of CDT, I see he has been subjected to ableist, normative ways of thinking and doing.

Critiquing normative assumptions, Abigail’s narrative provides insight into society’s existing beliefs and practices. Abigail discussed her reluctance, due to stigma, to disclose her learning disability:

That’s also something that I can share with people or not. But at the same time it’s like, yeah, but if you do share it - because there’s that other piece that you shouldn’t be ashamed of who you are. And it’s like if we have that mentality still, that we can’t share those things, then there’s still something wrong with society.

In terms of shame, disability scholar, Seibers (2006) wrote:
People with disabilities want to be able to function: to live with their disability, to come to know their body, to accept what it can do and to keep doing what they can do for as long as they can. They do not want to feel dominated by the people on whom they depend for help, and they want to be able to imagine themselves in the world without feeling ashamed. (p. 180).

In her qualitative study with 13 students with disabilities in a UK higher education institution, Kendell (2016) found that some students were apprehensive to disclose their disability due to the possible stigma attached. Brown and Brodlo (2015) commented on shame and stigma remarking that the social construction of stigma implies that students with disabilities are not capable. These authors inform that students were reluctant to disclose their disability due to perceived associated stigma.

Through the CDT lens we see that students with disabilities who are subjected to the “normal” paradigm are at risk for constructing an identity that is “less than”, which therefore affects, impacts their student identity and their sense of belonging. Disability is too often perceived as a problem necessitating a solution and not accepted (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012). Vaccaro et al. (2015) explained that, “People with disabilities “are constantly told what they cannot do and what their place in society is” (Charlton, 2006, p. 225)” and that many individuals internalize this oppression and “come to believe they are… less capable than others” (Charlton, 2006. P. 220).” (p. 673). Adopting a CDT framework offers the opportunity to counter the commonly held dichotomous assumption of normal versus abnormal.

Stories of power.

“It’s the relationships with the substantial power differences where telling about mental health – it’s risky to tell authoritative figures.” (Madeline)
The issue of power differentials and marginalization is instrumental to CDT when interrogating society’s construction of a “less than” conceptualization of disability. Drawing from Abigail’s story, I examine the power relationships between Abigail and her able-bodied peers. Abigail was ostracized by her privileged peers; privileged because they were “typical” learners within an educational landscape. Abigail faced stigma and discrimination, and described attending class as “unbearable”. Abigail’s peers, nursing students within a medical model cohort, labeled her as “less capable” due to her learning differences and socially constructed her identity as negative. I question if Abigail’s learning challenges unsettled the students’ rigid, traditional notions of who belongs in the classroom. Ultimately, this “unsettling” caused discomfort in accepting disability amidst a medical learning experience that emphasizes “fixing” and remediating others. CDT reminds us to pay attention to destructive associations with disability. Abigail’s experience illustrates that social systems can create marginalizing conditions for students with disabilities, ultimately leading to isolation. Abigail commented on how being marginalized by her peers affected her:

Some days I was really quiet. I kept to myself too even though outside I’m an extrovert. I’m not an introvert. I ended up introverting myself here…I guess when you know you have a learning disability you don’t want to tell people. There’s still that stigma attached and I haven’t actually told a lot of people until up to yesterday. People I know outside of school because most people would never know, seeing who I am you can’t tell. But there’s still that huge piece of, oh, if I tell, they’re going to think different - and it’s still like that. That’s another thing I think we as a society need to change too. We are doing good on other aspects but we need to change things completely, not just one thing.
Abigail’s perception of herself within the College changed. Abigail chose to construct herself differently, to behave differently, as a consequence of being shunned by her peers. This poignant storyline offers the lesson for faculty to be acutely aware of cultivating belonging in the classroom for their diverse learners.

The issue of power differentials between students with disabilities and faculty is illuminated with Rebecca’s narrative. One instructor questioned Rebecca regarding her need to have exams read to her and authoritatively told Rebecca, “…you should write your tests in class”. The instructor unwillingly provided the academic accommodation. This power imbalance becomes an obstacle to belonging. There is limited research regarding students with disabilities and support from faculty. Two studies suggest that students with disabilities face barriers, as Rebecca did, when seeking supports from faculty (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, & Lan, 2010; Olney & Brockelman, 2003). Rebecca’s story provides insight and direction for more inclusive practice. Are there better ways at the College to translate knowledge and inform instructors of eligibility and equality of academic accommodations? What principles of universal design for instruction (UDI) can faculty utilize in the classroom to reduce the need for retroactive academic accommodations? For example, faculty can proactively plan their teaching methodology to include untimed tests and provide power points/notes on line prior to class to create more inclusive education (Malhotra & Rowe, 2014).

Madeline’s narrative further illustrates power differentials for students with disabilities. Madeline, diagnosed with clinical depression and anxiety disorder, conveys her concerns regarding significant stigma for people with mental health challenges. Madeline expressed “professors should have more awareness of mental health” because she feels that herself and others “do not want to go to someone with authority” about their diagnosis.
Maholtra and Rowe (2014), in listening to narratives of 12 Canadian post-secondary students with physical disabilities, remarked on attitudinal barriers with regard to positions of power, “…physical barriers can be less personally harmful and have fewer direct impacts on the identity narratives of disabled individuals than barriers that arise because of the attitudes of people in positions of power… “ (p. 78). Abigail, Alice, William, and Sophie were faced with insensitive and discriminatory attitudes from those in a position of power; peers who are privileged learners who do not have a disability and faculty. These attitudes reflect the hegemonic perception that a person with a disability is less capable, less worthy.

Furthermore, a power imbalance exists at the College between professionals in the Disability Service Office (DSO) and the participants in this study. All participants in this study were registered with the DSO, which involved providing medical documentation of a disability diagnosis. Although participants felt supported by professionals in the DSO, requiring documentation to receive service reflects the normative discourse and the binary bio-medical model adopted at the College, placing the disability service professionals as “guardians of normality” (Calderon-Almendros & Calderon-Almendros, 2016; p.109). The use of medicalized language perpetuates a normative focus (Goodley, 2013) and an emphasis on accommodating medical conditions creates “power over”.

Power differentials therefore become a disabling force at the College. Professionals and faculty hold privileged status and thus power in the construction of student identity and a sense of belonging. Vaccaro et al. (2017) advised professionals working with post-secondary students with disabilities to pay attention to the power they hold to convey messages that significantly impact the student’s ability to master the student role.
**Stories re-written.**

All participants narrated their post-secondary journey against the backdrop of their high school reality. Stories of eight participants elucidate that the post-secondary context was their first authentic experience where they felt success as a student. In interpreting participant stories, there is a commonality of resistance to their old high school story. CDT provides a framework in which to recognize that participants resisted stereotypes, insensitive attitudes, and reduced societal expectations for disabled individuals. Resistance of participants’ lived high school story led them to post-secondary, a place where they actively transformed and re-storied their educational lives. There is also commonality to this transformation; common stories of an emerging student identity, experiences of belonging, and of academic success.

Composing a new story was not without anxieties and fears for many participants. Students narrated their doubts and reservations prior to attending post-secondary. Yet students overcame these fears, while also persisting in the face of barriers existing at the College. They actively resist the educational system’s paradigm of “normal”.

In sharp contrast to high school, participants acquire student skills, feel supported academically and relationally with at least one faculty member and/or peer, and acknowledge their own agency in the process of achieving in the post-secondary landscape. The participants’ transformation, in comparison to high school, is a re-written story of **becoming and belonging.**

**A note on language.**

As noted in the findings of this research project, William’s narrative incorporates language, such as “deficit” and “asset”, which is vocabulary associated with the medical model perspective of disability. This reflects William’s awareness of the deficit-based culture in which he lives and studies. William’s storyline illuminates the entrenched dominant medical paradigm that can
exist at educational institutions and which subjects students with disabilities to prejudicial practices.

Sophie, Madeline, Margarite, Rebecca, Alice and Abigail’s stories also provide insight into an awareness of a deficit-based perception of disability at the College as their narratives speak to stigma and judgment.

Use of language in relation to “normal” versus “abnormal” can perpetuate ableist attitudes and the perception of disability as tragedy. As mentioned previously, as a disability service coordinator, I have been exposed to discourse identifying students with disabilities as abnormal and a problem. Discourses structure everyday life at the College. If normal/abnormal discourse continues to permeate the College, students with disabilities will continue to be categorized as those in need of “fixing” rather than viewed as students with unique characteristics and part of the overall diversity on campus. CDT resists oppressive discourse and provides a place to critique hegemonic asset/deficit, binary language. Learning from the voice of the participants, the College can now begin to deconstruct normative assumptions and shift from the language of to “normal” to diversity.

One approach to shifting institutional attitudes is through changing the language of institutional policy. Since it is human rights based legislation that guides disability practice in Canadian colleges and universities, policy is typically written in legal-based language, using terms such as “obligation” and “burden” (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Language reflects societal attitudes, beliefs, and discourse and can serve to maintain negative assumptions and attitudes (Myers et al., 2013).

Similarly, bio-medical language is typically embedded in institutional accessibility policy (Hibbs & Pothier, 2006). Many Canadian universities operate from a bio-medical lens which
translates into discourse and practice that pathologizes the conditions related to the label of disability. A bio-medical framework is also the foundation for government funding programs for disabled students. Students are required to provide medical documentation from professional experts in order to be eligible for services and equipment. Disability service offices are also responsible for reporting annual statistics of students served, based on medical labels. Bio-medical language does not align with a climate of inclusion as it frames disability as deficit and cultivates ableism. Replacing medical/legal language with supportive and welcoming vocabulary would promote a shift to more inclusive attitudes on campus.

**Critical disability theory: Interpretation of narratives of engagement and barriers.**

While most peer/faculty/staff interactions with participants were positive, there were stories that reflect insensitive attitudes from others on campus. Some faculty also neglected, although not necessarily intentionally, to foster belonging. Further, there were other systemic and physical/environmental barriers that students described which restricted full participation. Examining the inequalities and systems that oppress students with disabilities within the College through a CDT lens is the first step to deconstructing policies and practices that perpetuate exclusion.

This study has revealed that, while students do experience belonging, there are conditions where students still feel stigma and discrimination. Students are expected to overcome these conditions and the socially constructed negative perception of disability evident at the College. In their work exploring students with learning disabilities and how their adjustment to higher education influences their identity development, Hadley, Hsu, Addison, and Talbot (2017) expressed, “Within an organization or university, messages about what is assumed and believed are conveyed through its people (faculty and staff)…” (p. 182).
Viewing student stories through the CDT lens highlights that fact that campus stakeholders must understand that it is a shared responsibility to facilitate a fully inclusive environment. Higher education institutions that do not consider the social adjustment of students with disabilities are affecting the “academic development” of these students (Shahriar & Syed, 2017, p. xxii). Shahriar and Syed (2017) insist that higher education institutions carry the responsibility to provide a supportive environment for disabled students to foster acceptance, which will in turn facilitate academic achievement.

Other studies with students with disabilities highlight the negative influence of barriers in higher education to students’ feeling included. Kendell’s (2016) qualitative study of 13 U.K. university students with disabilities reported attitudinal barriers affected students’ participation. Crow (as cited in Kendell, 2016) argued that students with disabilities are at risk for poor academic performance, not due to capability, but due to “social, attitudinal and environmental barriers” (Crow as cited in Kendell, 2016). Mahotra and Rowe (2014) remind us, “attitudinal and physical barriers remain within modern university and college institutions” (p. 86).

Regarding the barrier of a segregated space to write exams, I argue this practice is exclusionary for students with disabilities and makes them more vulnerable to social disapproval. Likewise, Liasidou (2014) suggested that a separate exam room for disabled students is a “segregating and stigmatizing provision.” (p. 124, as cited in Kendall, 2016, p.7). Replicating this concern are the narratives from students in a qualitative study conducted with 16 students with disabilities at a mid-Atlantic American university (Marshak, Van Wieren, Raeke Ferrell, Swiss & Dugan; 2010). The study found that many students resisted academic accommodations, such as exam accommodations, in order to “avoid negative social reaction” (p. 154) and because they were concerned “their peers would look at them differently or that they would not feel as if
they were like everybody else” (p. 154).

**Summary of critical disability lens.**

In summary, critical disability theory is a valuable lens in which to view disability within higher education because it calls attention to barriers to success within the institution and it recognizes the multifaceted nature of disabled students’ lives. The CDT concept of disability as fluid temporally and contextually recognizes that a student’s disability may be recently diagnosed, may change over time, and the impact may differ in the classroom from other areas on campus. For educators, administrators and disability service providers, the critical disability perspective highlights the intersectionality of disability and other social identities. CDT focuses on emancipation and offers “powerful tools to break down hierarchies and include underrepresented voices” (Evans, Broido, Brown & Wilke, 2017, p. 69).

Further, CDT considers the lived experience of the effects of impairment which offers educators and professionals a framework to “gain a better understanding of why there are times when impairment matter more, why there are times when environment matters more, and why there are times when the interactions between impairment and society make functional limitations more or less difficult to manage”. (Evans et al., 2017, p. 69).

In considering and interpreting the findings of this study, I ask the following questions:

1. How might incorporating CDT and diversity model thinking inform changes in policies and practices on campus?
2. How would institutional changes in policy and practice affect disabled students’ social and academic experiences in terms of a sense of belonging?
3. Do students have to strive for “normalcy” to experience a sense of belonging?
4. Do students have to perceive themselves as “normal” to fit in?

**Social Acceptance and a Sense of Belonging.**

In this study, participants’ stories reveal that positive interactions with peers and faculty can have a transformative effect on developing a student identity and a sense of belonging. Student narratives suggest that these connections allow participants to feel like “just another student”. As participants studied side by side with another student, completed assignments collaboratively, and reached out to have discussions with faculty, they felt like a member of the student body.

A great deal of literature links social connections and supportive peer/faculty interactions with a sense of belonging for typical learners (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow & Salomone, 2002/2003; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Other studies report the importance of supportive peer networks with a sense of belonging for disabled students (Megivern, Pellerito & Mowbray; 2003; Adams & Proctor, 2010). Litner et al’s (2005) work involving students with learning disabilities, found that social engagement with peers supported academic achievement and was critical to adjusting to post-secondary life. In their work, Lombardi, Murray and Gerdes (2012) discovered that first year students with disabilities were at risk of adjusting to, and successfully completing, college. A contributing risk factor was limited peer support, which included emotional support from peers and the ability to make friends. Hoffman et al. (2002) also noted the importance of peer relationships for post-secondary students and recommend including perceived peer support in any assessment of a sense of belonging.

There is limited literature regarding disabled students’ experiences with faculty beyond the technical requirements of academic accommodations. All students in this study expressed
positive interactions and/or support from at least one instructor, which shaped their sense of belonging. Similarly, positive interactions with faculty providing a sense of belonging on campus was a common theme in Lomabardi et al’s (2012) work with disabled students. Other studies that have demonstrated findings where students with disabilities report positive interactions with, and support from, faculty (Adams & Proctor, 2010; Kendell, 2016; Troiano, 2003; Vacarro et al., 2015).

Mixed support from faculty was described in Kendell’s (2016) small-scale study qualitative study of 13 disabled students attending a UK university. Difficulty receiving support from faculty was described by students with disabilities in Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger & Lan’s work (2010).

Educators with positive attitudes regarding inclusive education can influence both colleagues’ and students’ attitudes (Mahotra & Rowe, 2014). In their work exploring students with learning disabilities and how their adjustment to higher education influenced their identity development, Hadley, Hsu, Addison, and Talbot (2017) expressed, “Within an organization or university, messages about what is assumed and believed are conveyed through its people (faculty and staff)…” (p. 182). It is critical that educators are informed and trained to support students with disabilities beyond their legal obligation to accommodate academically.

Most institutions and disability service offices do not prioritize social supports and social integration on campus for students with disabilities (Hadley et al., 2017; Litner, Mann-Fedder & Guerard, 2005) and yet this social integration has been reported as “key factors to student success” for students with disabilities (Leake & Stodden, 2014; p.399).

I interpret student stories to reveal that the core of students’ identity and their sense of belonging lies in the relationships developed with others at the College. In view of participants’
narratives, I propose that sharing a social, relational space and engaging in common, everyday student experiences with others on campus, strengthens the student identity of students with disabilities, which then enhances belonging. In their work, Vaccaro et al. (2015) also found that hanging out, sharing space, and going to the library helped the students to “fit in”. These positive social connections are particularly significant considering that social acceptance is the foundation of a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; De Wall & Bushman, 2011). Strayhorn (2012) asserts that in order to feel belonging, students need to feel included within the social context of the school.

The factors that enhance these relationships are: if the student feels cared for, if the student feels acknowledged, if the student feels valued, if the student feels that their disability is accepted. The conversations and interactions that make up the everyday fabric of student life, these are the connections that students in this study want to be a part of – every day, while being themselves. Each participant’s story reflects the desire to be their unique self without having to sacrifice social acceptability.

**Disability as Diversity**

One approach to reconfiguring disability within a post-secondary environment that I align with is the diversity model, where all learners are recognized as legitimate students. In colleges and universities, student diversity has included race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and less commonly, disability (Kim & Aquino, 2017). Disability has typically been considered a construct positioned separately from diversity (Kim & Aquino, 2017; Linton, 1998; Shallish, 2017).

Incorporating a diversity approach to disability shifts the focus away from limitation, deficit, and abnormality. This study has highlighted ableist discourse and practices within the
College, which perpetuate the hegemony of normal. A shift for the College to a diversity framework parallels a human rights/social justice approach which disability scholars promote to eliminate an educational culture that protects ableism (Davis, 2002; Linton, 1998; Hibbs & Pothier, 2006).

In their recent work on disability and diversity in higher education, Kim and Aquino (2017) wrote:

Viewing disability as a characteristic of diversity and examining how it intersects with other diversity memberships may not only share revealing information related to potential salience of diversity identities, but also elucidate the role of disability in overall identity development, self perception and success in college (p. xii).

Recognizing interlocking social identities and the fluidity of disability, the diversity model offers a framework to imagine authentic inclusion, which incorporates a sense of belonging. Post-secondary institutions can go beyond providing the minimal requirement of academic accommodations and physical access to foster social inclusivity and a sense of belonging for all diverse learners.

A diversity approach incorporates a holistic view of accepting differences within Individuals and values their unique characteristics (Aquino, Alhaddab & Kim, 2017). Shallish (2017) described diversity work in higher education as, “the perspectives, cultures, and histories experienced by non-privileged groups and the act(s) of integrating and embedding this work into or disrupting existing institutional structures and practice.” (p. 21). In her inquiry into experiences of higher education diversity workers, Shallish revealed that, although most diversity workers from the six participating American colleges acknowledged that disability shared characteristics with other marginalized groups on campus, their conceptualization and
practice focused on disability as a medical issue.

To incorporate disability as part of diversity, post-secondary institutions can situate disability rights within a civil rights discourse thereby viewing disability as parallel to other historically marginalized social groups. (Miller, Wynn & Webb, 2017). Universal design for instruction (UDI) can also be implemented in classrooms and on campus. UDI reduces the need for retrofitting academic accommodations that serve to “normalize or assimilate students with disabilities into higher education culture” (Shallish, 2017, p. 26), maintaining an ableist culture on campus. Additionally, rather than segmenting services, administrators and resource professionals, such as disability service coordinators and diversity officers, can collaborate and amalgamate services, programs and resources in the “re-imagining of diversity beyond deficits” (Miller et al., 2017, pg. 41).

In this study, it is clear that the participants want to move forward with their academic goals in an environment that is welcoming and accepting, where they can flourish in all their complexity and variability, as a student and as a person. I propose that a diversity framework be the foundation in considering the development of becoming a student and the development of a sense of belonging for post-secondary students with disabilities. If the identity of students with disabilities is no longer based on the medical model and the concept of “normative”, then institutional policies and practice can be created to reflect a lens of diversity. Given that the College upholds a value of inclusivity, championing belonging as integral to inclusion through a diversity framework is an approach that will not only support students with disabilities but all learners.

I agree with Pothier and Devlin (2006) who, drawing on the concept of belonging, call for a “new way to conceptualize disability, one that emphasizes a genuine inclusiveness not just
abstract rights” (p. 2). In this study, participants constructed their student identity as students who are highly capable and have differences. This reflects the construct of disability as diversity. A diversity model within post-secondary institutions can offer the “genuine inclusiveness” that Pothier and Devlin allude to. The diversity model recognizes, as William stated, “things that make me uniquely me”.

Faculty, resource professionals, and administrators need to be cognizant that the institution plays a significant role in the evolution of belongingness and in how students with disabilities construct their identity. This research can inform policy and practice by adding a more nuanced understanding of becoming and belonging within the higher educational context.

Lenses of identity and critical disability allow for a more robust understanding of students’ sense of belonging, one that includes their voice to teach us so we can improve their lived experience on campus. New understandings can now lead the College to a shift in perception; one that views students as diverse, as capable rather than deficient, and as having individual agency. Through this platform the effort can be made to transform a stigmatized social identity and generate a new discourse, one of diversity. Diversity thinking affirms each student’s uniqueness.

The results of this study showcase the importance and relevancy of belonging for students with disabilities and the association of a sense of belonging with improved learning. The narratives provide an important contribution towards informing policy and best practice with the development of innovative approaches to the construction of student identity and to experiencing belonging in addition to overturning a deficit model to one of diversity.

The students and their stories therefore, leave the College in a hopeful place, one where, through the acknowledgment of student stories, there can be a broader conception of inclusivity
that incorporates a sense of belonging. Student stories can shape relational and diversity practices within the College that go beyond procedural and technical academic accommodations. I agree with McRue (2006) who stated, “An accessible society according to the best, critically disabled perspectives, is not simply one with ramps and Braille signs on ‘public’ buildings, but one in which our ways of relating to, and depending on each other have been reconfigured (p. 94).

A Multifaceted Critical Lens of Identity and Disability

As noted in Chapter 2, I utilized CTD coupled with identity theories, recognizing the interwoven elements among these frameworks, to more thoroughly understand the complicated stories of disability, student identity, and belonging. Rather than considering each theoretical framework independently, I focused on their relationship as an integrated avenue to explore and interpret the data in this study. I adopted this approach to reveal the complexity of the participant stories and to illuminate the multifaceted nature of their student identity and belonging experiences. Findings demonstrated that the development of a student identity and the development of a sense of belonging do not follow a linear progression but rather emerge in a complicated, interrelated manner.

I drew upon the theoretical commonalities, complexities, strengths and contributions of CDT and each identity theory. I found the following examples as the more salient complexities and common links, which served as valuable tools for data interpretation:

- The social construction of identity posited by all four theories.
- The relevance of intersecting identities as recognized by CDT and intersectionality.
- The highlighted relational perspective of CDT and intersectionality, which considers transformations when differing identities meet.
- The importance of the historical and socio-political context in examining disability.
- All four theories view identity as negotiated, temporal, and contingent.
- CDT and intersectionality examine power, influence and the processes that structure society.
- Impairment and its affects considered by CDT, imbued with the concept of intersecting identities.

Applying interrelated theoretical elements in the analysis resulted in a sharp focus of distinct themes as well as the recognition that multiple and layered identities (such as parent, low-income student, mature student), independent of disability, can influence student identity and belonging experiences. Also, I was able to extract from stories, such as Abigail and William’s narratives, that discrimination and exclusion can indeed exist solely based on the category of disability. Considering the functional, psycho-social, and emotional aspects of impairment, such as in Sophie’s storyline, illustrates the possible effects upon many categories of identity.

This novel, multifaceted approach provided an expression of the participants’ student identity and belonging experiences that goes beyond the existing literature on the topic. In the realm of post-secondary, the literature typically presents singular theoretical frameworks in which to examine belonging. These frameworks submit a one-dimensional interpretation of disabled students’ experiences of belonging. Other multidimensional models on belonging illustrate impacting variables upon the process of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012; Vacarro et al., 2015) but do not explain belonging experiences through multiple, interconnected theories. Using a multifaceted theoretical model, I found I was able to uncover more complex and interwoven related insights from the data.
I introduce this multifaceted theoretical model as a place for others to examine belonging in post-secondary for disabled students, as a unique perspective to learn what student stories have to offer. Visually, I represent the model as a diamond, with four facets as the four different interlinked theories. The four facets are distinct yet intertwine and overlap, meeting and mixing together to sharply illuminate a focal point. The focal point in this model is student stories of belonging experiences. A visual representation of this multifaceted lens is provided in Appendix A. Considering belonging within this model allows for the elucidation of the interconnection and reciprocal relationship of student identity with belonging and the multiplicity of factors, such as engagement and barriers that impact belonging.

Viewing narrative accounts through this framework has uncovered deeper insights and therefore both theoretical and practical applications can be deliberated when cultivating institutional engagement to create a belonging-centred campus. I propose that this lens be adopted when examining disabled students’ experiences of belonging to generate new knowledge and to contribute to deeper understandings of the belonging experiences for post-secondary disabled students.

**Chapter Summary**

This study sought to understand a sense of belonging for students with disabilities within a post-secondary environment and to learn what significance students with disabilities ascribe to belonging. Narratives constructed by students hold interwoven stories of becoming and belonging. Student stories reveal that the development of becoming a student is critically significant to the development of a sense of belonging. Students articulated that experiencing belonging impacted academic motivation and success. Other significant factors impacting
belonging, such as engagement with others and existing barriers, were also narrated by participants.

Viewing narrative accounts through the multidimensional approach of critical disability theory infused with identities theories allows for the opportunity to uncover deeper meanings. The narratives of the participants in this study offer rich insight into their evolving student identity, into influential factors on belonging such as engagement and barriers, and into their overall sense of belonging and/or lack of feeling group membership. Synder and Mitchell (2006) expressed how important narratives are to “destabilize our dominant ways of knowing disability” (p. 4). These analytical lenses unsettle traditional thinking to enable a new of conception of disability. Further, the diversity model offers a paradigm shift from disability as limitation to disability as part of the natural diversity we see among humankind.

Research findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the experiences of belonging for students with disabilities. The findings and new multifaceted theoretical lens will be relevant to post-secondary administrators, faculty, resource professionals, staff and students when considering the creation, implementation, and evaluation of practices which cultivate a sense of belonging on campus for students with disabilities. With regard to the College, valuable stories and student voices can now guide new belonging-centred initiatives. Listening to student voices brings new imaginings, excitement, and possibility. The College is positioned to become a leader in creating a truly inclusive campus culture; a place where students with disabilities can know that they are enough, know that they are capable, and know that they are welcomed.
Chapter 7 Theoretical Implications and Recommendations

Theoretical Implications

As noted earlier, applying a critical disability theoretical lens to an examination of the belonging experiences of students with disabilities provides researchers with an in-depth understanding of how a sense of belonging is both developed and thwarted in an educational environment. To elaborate, CDT calls attention to the ways in which institutions may uphold and demonstrate practices of “normalcy”, thereby causing systemic, structural, and/or attitudinal barriers to belonging. This framework can support inquiries of belonging as an integral aspect of full inclusion. That is, CDT enables the researcher to consider inclusion that goes beyond an institution’s legal obligation to provide academic accommodations and to consider avenues to reduce stigma and discrimination.

To review, student narratives in this study emphasized the relevance of a sense of belonging to their everyday post-secondary lives. A lens of CDT, which highlights the multifaceted nature of disability, can guide researchers to more comprehensive investigations on belonging as it relates to power/powerlessness, stigma, oppression and marginalization in order to improve the lives of this student population.

CDT recognizes that disability is mediated by other social identities. Therefore, incorporating an identity framework, such as intersectionality, with CDT is a complementary approach to conceptualizing the experience of belonging for students with disabilities who hold multiple identities.

I considered other multiple and intersecting identities along with CDT because, as scholars argue, disability is messy, is slippery and does not represent a single, unified experience (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Students with disabilities narrated varied experiences of
belonging. A multifaceted critical identity and disability lens is a useful framework for researchers to conduct a detailed examination of students’ overlapping social identity groups and how these might interact to result in discrimination and stigma. This frameworks can offer the researcher a sharp focus on the multiple and complex layers of oppression, power, and inclusion.

Adopting this multifaceted lens in this study illuminated the fact that participants are more than their single emerging student identity, that the participants, all of whom carry multiple identities, resisted their high school stories of exclusion and academic struggle, that the participants resisted faculty/peer attitudes and language that conveyed the message of “less than” and “other”, that the participants resisted barriers to belonging, and that the participants composed a new story where they intentionally shaped their student identity - an identity of academic success and belonging.

CDT, interwoven with identity theories, can be used to launch future research aimed at transformation and emancipation of this diverse population of learners. Research grounded in this theoretical framework has the potential to positively impact institutional attitudes, policies and practice that could serve not only disabled students, but also students of other marginalized identity categories.

**Recommendations**

The present study sought to increase understanding of a sense of belonging for post-secondary students with disabilities by examining participants’ experiences of belonging and the meaning they ascribe to belonging. Student voices offer new knowledge leading to the following recommendations:
1. Students with disabilities should be involved along with administrators, policy makers and other stakeholders to develop and enact institutional policies and practices to create a belonging-centred culture on campus. The new groups and communities of practice on campus can be developed, such as an advisory board, focus groups, or committees, to discuss and inform on belongingness issues and to act on initiatives that facilitate a shift towards re-conceptualizing inclusion as more than just the removal of physical barriers and providing academic accommodations. The groups would need to attend to the disconnect between the institutional value of inclusivity and the embedded discourse/policy/practices that focus on deficit in relation to students with disabilities. The groups should intentionally design spaces and opportunities that promote belonging and create these inclusive practices across all aspects of the post-secondary experience.

2. Faculty should be informed of their pivotal role in fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom. This can be achieved by assigning partners, engaging in collaborative pedagogy and practising teaching strategies aligned with universal design for learning.

3. Institutional stakeholders should be informed of how disability interacts with multiple aspects of identity and experience and of how developing a student identity is integral to developing a sense of belonging.

4. Promote an understanding with institutional stakeholders of disability from a diversity lens rather than a deficit lens. The college can use the diversity framework as a new framework for understanding disability. Rather than focusing solely on the legal access and accommodation aspects which perpetuates exclusion, the College can adopt principles of universal design and other inclusive strategies as well as promote/use discourse that is representative of belonging rather than “burden”, to transform the
campus environment into a genuinely inclusive and equitable setting not only for disabled students but for all learners.

5. Continue to engage and consult with disabled students regarding their belonging perspectives/experiences to make informed decisions and more closely examine systems, programs, and strategies that lead to greater belongingness.

6. Locate the Disability Service Office within the Learning Commons area of the College so that students with disabilities are receiving service in a vibrant space on campus.

7. Focus on disability as a campus-wide issue not solely as an issue that is addressed through the Disability Service Office.
Chapter 8 Study Limitations, Future Research, Conclusion

In this chapter, I discuss the limitations of the project, potential for future research and a provide a conclusion.

Study Limitations

It is important in a research project to note any limitations of the study. Firstly, the specific participant and context studied in this project cannot be applied to a broader population. The small sample size of this study also limits the ability to apply findings. Further, this study was conducted on only one campus of the College, the main campus.

All students in this study were registered with the Disability Service Office (DSO) and accessed supports. Findings from this study may have differed if students who were not receiving DSO support had volunteered as participants. This study, therefore, is missing the voice of students who have not received formal service from the DSO and yet are still managing a disability while learning in a post-secondary environment.

Self-selection bias must also be noted. As this study relied on volunteers, the respondents do not necessarily represent an overall representation of the target population of disabled students. Only one participant in this study was male. A more balanced sample of male/female participants may have garnered differences in findings. Finally, the recruitment poster/flyer indicated that the study was entitled “Students with Disabilities Share Stories of Belonging”. This title may have discouraged potential participants who did not have a sense of belonging at the college.
Future Research

In light of this project, important issues arise for future research. More research examining educational inclusion and belonging utilizing the proposed multifaceted critical lens of identity and disability, as described in the Chapter 6, would contribute to a deeper and broader understanding of the interlocking patterns of discrimination for this student population. Deep explorations of interwoven marginalized identities and oppression would serve to further inform policy and practice when launching belonging initiatives on campus.

Additional inquiries are recommended with this under-researched group to gain a more thorough understanding of the relationship between belonging and learning. Future investigation on the topic of belonging could also include the voices of other campus stakeholders, such as faculty, non-disabled students, and management, which would garner more knowledge to apply to inclusive policy and practice. Further research assessing belongingness following the implementation of belonging initiatives would glean useful information regarding organizational progress within a diversity framework.

Conclusion

“...it’s about accepting everybody no matter what their walk of life is.” (Abigail)

This research begins to fill the gap in the literature on the belonging experiences of students with disabilities in colleges and universities. Narrative methodology allowed for gathering rich data that illuminated the experiences of nine students. In this project I applied a multifaceted theoretical framework, using Critical Disability Theory interwoven with identity theories to inform the study.

Stories emphasized learning how to be a student as foundational to a sense of belonging. Positive engagement with faculty and peers enhanced belonging and data make clear that
belonging impacts learning. Systemic, environmental, physical and attitudinal obstacles were narrated which thwarted belonging opportunities. Participants, resisting disabling barriers, resisting their old story of failure in highschool, and resisting societal expectations, composed a new story in their post-secondary life, one where they thrive academically and experience an emerging sense of belonging.

Findings affirm that belonging is a dynamic and on-going process. Belonging holds significant meaning to participants; not only valuable socially, but also academically. These stories of belonging offer a first step in shifting the College’s dominant disability culture of deficit to one of diversity. The College can now harness student voices and this new knowledge of a sense of belonging to create a strong, shared vision and commitment to full inclusivity for students with disabilities within a diversity framework.

A diversity framework respects students of all variations, including disability, where everyone on campus is treated and valued equally. The College, as a diversity and belonging – centred institution, can serve as an influential example to the community and society. As Leake and Stodden (2014) note, “The ultimate goal of the Disability Rights Movement has been to reach a point where everyone is viewed and treated as deserving of respect and full social acceptance. Higher education can play a leadership role in attaining this goal by creating inclusive and welcoming campus environments that serve as models for the wider society.” (p. 406).
References


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_______2009b. *Universal design in higher education: What is universal design?* Huntersville, NC: AHEAD


Calderon-Almendros, I & Calderon-Almendros, R. 2016; I open the coffin and here I am: Disability as oppression and education as liberation in the construction of personal identity. Disability and Society, 31(1), 100-115.


Miller, R., Wynn, R. & Webb, K. Queering disability in higher education: Views from the intersections. In E.Kim & K. Aquino (Eds.), *Disability as diversity in higher education: policies and practices to enhance student success* (pp. 31-44). New York, NY: Routlege.


doi:10.1080/03075079912331379878


Appendix A  A Multifaceted Critical Lens of Identity and Disability

Critical Disability Theory
Erickson’s Identity Theory
Multiple Identity Theory
Intersectionality

Student Stories of Belonging
Appendix B Letter of Initial Contact

Hello, my name is Trish Foy and I am a doctoral student in Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies at the University of Calgary. I am currently recruiting students with disabilities for my research project which will be part of my dissertation. This study has been approved by the University of Calgary Cojoint Health Research Ethics Board.

The title of the study is: Students With Disabilities Share Stories of Belonging

Students with disabilities are being invited to take part in this study to share their stories about a sense of belonging in relation to their life as a college student. These stories will help to inform policy makers, faculty, staff and students about creating a more inclusive college campus.

I am a disability service coordinator in the Student Support department. My colleague, __________________________, feels that you may be interested in participating in this study.

My interest in this research developed from my experience working with students as a disability service coordinator and my desire to learn more about how students with disabilities experience a sense of belonging within a post-secondary environment.

I am looking for full and part-time students who attend face-to-face courses on the main campus and who have a permanent physical, sensory, learning, mental health, or chronic health disability.

Each participant will be interviewed for approximately 60 minutes. The interview will involve broad, open-ended questions regarding social and academic experiences on campus. The interviews will take place on the main campus and will be scheduled to accommodate your schedule.

Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time. Your identity will be known only by myself.
If you are interested in taking part in this research project or have any questions/concerns, please feel free to contact me at trishjfoy@gmail.com or 250-505-3736.

Thank you in advance for your willingness to participate in this research.

______________________

Trish Foy
Appendix C Recruitment Poster

RESEARCH STUDY – SEEKING VOLUNTEERS

Students with Disabilities Share Stories of Belonging

- Seeking students who have been diagnosed with a permanent disability and who are enrolled in face-to-face courses on the main campus.

- This research project will explore students’ sense of belonging and the significance they ascribe to a sense of belonging in their post-secondary experience to help create new supportive policies, programs, and services.
• There is research with the general student population that shows a sense of belonging enhances motivation and academic performance and contributes to program completion. There is very little Canadian research involving students with disabilities, especially using their own voice to tell their stories.

• Participation will involve one face-to-face interview of approximately 1 hour in length. Two shorter interviews may be scheduled if more convenient for the participant.

_The University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board and the College Research Ethics Committee have approved this research study._ University of Calgary Ethics ID REB15-1501_REN1
## Appendix D Participant Demographics

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<td>None</td>
<td>Human Services/Year 1</td>
<td>Attention Deficit Disorder</td>
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</table>
Appendix E Informed Consent

CONSENT FORM

TITLE: Students With Disabilities Share Stories of Belonging

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Elizabeth Anne Hughson
University of Calgary
hughson@ucalgary.ca

PhD STUDENT / INVESTIGATOR: Trish Foy
trishjfoy@gmail.com

ETHICS ID #: REB15-1501_REN1
This consent form is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, please ask. Take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. You will receive a copy of this form.

**BACKGROUND**

Increasingly, students with disabilities are entering post-secondary institutions. Typically, academic accommodations, such as extended time on tests or textbooks in audio format, are arranged for students with disabilities to provide equal access to education. Academic accommodations are an important aspect of inclusion into the post-secondary environment.

Another integral aspect of inclusion is experiencing a sense of belonging. The goal of the study is to provide information that can help college and university policymakers, service providers, and faculty/staff create policies and programs that facilitate a sense of belonging on campus for students with disabilities.

In social science research, there is a growing interest in the concept of a sense of belonging. The current research on the broader post-secondary student population indicates that a sense of belonging enhances motivation, academic performance, and contributes to program completion.
However, there is very little research exploring a sense of belonging with students with disabilities, especially through their own voice and in Canadian post-secondary institutions. This study is intended to address this gap in knowledge.

This research involves a narrative approach where participants will be asked to share their stories of a sense of belonging in an interview format.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to an understanding of how students with disabilities experience a sense of belonging in a post-secondary context.

To achieve this purpose, I will be looking at:

- What stories do students with disabilities tell about a sense of belonging?
- What do students with disabilities say about the significance of a sense of belonging in their overall post-secondary experience?

**WHAT WOULD I HAVE TO DO?**

You will participate in a face-to-face individual interview with the researcher for approximately 60 minutes. You will be interviewed on a date, time, and at a location that is convenient for you. Approximately 8-10 students with disabilities will be recruited to voluntarily participate. You will be asked open-ended broad questions in the interview. You will be asked to tell stories of your academic and social experiences and of your sense of belonging in relation to your student life at college. You will also be asked about the significance you assign to a sense of
belonging in a post-secondary environment. The interview will be audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim.

During the narrative interviews, you will be asked for clarification and feedback. You may be contacted by phone 1-2 weeks following the interview if clarification is needed on the meaning or context of any part of your interview. You will also be contacted after the research report has been completed to check for accuracy of findings and interpretations.

**WHAT ARE THE RISKS?**

There are minimal risks involved in this study. However, if you become fatigued, another interview time will be scheduled. Also, if you become stressed when describing your experiences, information regarding campus counselling will be provided and the interview can be re-scheduled or cancelled.

**WILL I BENEFIT IF I TAKE PART?**

If you agree to participate in this study there may or may not be a direct benefit to you.

By participating in this research, you will be contributing to the research field of post-secondary disability studies. We know very little about the experiences of students with disabilities in relation to a sense of belonging, especially from their own voice, and especially in a post-secondary Canadian environment.

This research is intended not only to better understand how post-secondary students with disabilities experience a sense of belonging, but also to better understand how institutional policy and practice may influence this.

New knowledge generated from the study has the potential benefit to:
- be utilized to create new policies, programs, and services to better support students with disabilities on campus in relation to a sense of belonging, and
- to provide current information to researchers interested in examining inclusion for students with disabilities.

**DO I HAVE TO PARTICIPATE?**

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without consequence. If you wish to withdraw, please contact Trish Foy.

If any new information becomes available that might affect your willingness to participate in this study, you will be informed as soon as possible.

**WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING, OR DO I HAVE TO PAY FOR ANYTHING?**

You will not be paid for participating in this study and there will be no costs for you to incur.

**WILL MY RECORDS BE KEPT PRIVATE?**

Your personal identity (name, disability) will only be known by myself. You will be provided with the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Your name will not be attached to any data collected. Some statements from your interview may be cited as a quote. The quote, however, will not be attributed to you.

Your taped interview and the transcript of the interview will be kept confidential and secured in a locked filing cabinet. The data will be password-protected on my computer. The raw data will be secured for 5 years. After this time period, the data will be destroyed.

My PhD supervisory committee and the University of Calgary Conjoint Health Records Ethics Board will have access to the records but no identifying information will be available.
WHAT IS THE PLAN FOR SHARING OF DATA?

The data will be used for a PhD dissertation. The research findings may also be used for:

- government agencies,
- scientific groups,
- presentations at conferences,
- publication in professional journals, and
- a handbook for disability service providers and learning support personnel.

The research findings will be provided to policy-makers, faculty, and other student advocates such as the Student’s Union, the Student Access and Support Department, and the National Educational Association of Disabled Students.

SIGNATURES

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding your participation in the research project and agree to participate as a participant. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact:

Trish Foy
Dr. Anne Hughson

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a possible participant in this research, please contact the Chair, Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board, University of Calgary at 403-220-7990.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Name</th>
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<td>Signature and Date</td>
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<tr>
<td>Witness’ Name</td>
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</table>

The University of Calgary Conjoint Health Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

A signed copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.
Appendix F Interview Guide

Rapport will be established with the participant. Following a preamble regarding the purpose of the research and the knowledge translation outcomes, the interview topics, as outlined below, will be presented. I will also probe once the student tells their story about his/her experience to learn more and to deepen an understanding of their sense of belonging.

Preamble

To begin, I will introduce myself and discuss the research purpose:
Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. I want to explain the purpose of the research. I am interested in hearing the stories of students with disabilities about their academic and social experiences and their sense of belonging in a post-secondary environment.

Although there is research investigating a sense of belonging in the general student population, there are very few studies that explore this topic with students with disabilities. We know very little about their experiences, especially from their own voice.

The College, as other Canadian colleges and universities, has a mission that states a value of inclusivity for all learners. A sense of belonging is an aspect of inclusion. This research is not only to better understand how post-secondary students with disabilities experience a sense of belonging, but also to better understand how institutional policy and practice may influence this.

Human rights legislation guides accessibility policy and practice in post-secondary education. Technical and procedural academic accommodations are provided through the disability service office in colleges and universities. Despite these services, current literature expresses the concern that students with disabilities are not experiencing full inclusion.
It is my hope that this study will help service providers, faculty/staff, and institution administrators better understand students with disabilities’ sense of belonging and in turn inform policy and practice to facilitate full inclusion on the college/university campus.

**Topics**

1. Tell me about your history as a secondary education student.

2. Tell me about your experiences in making the decision to come to college and applying to college.

3. Tell me about your experiences being in a college.

   * I will probe further if the student initiates the topic of a sense of belonging: Tell me about your experiences in the classroom, with faculty, with peers, in other student life situations. Do you feel like you belong here?

4. Tell me about the kind of support you receive from faculty/staff, whether for academic issues or non-academic issues.

5. If the participant expresses their experiences on the topic of a sense of belonging, I will probe for an explanation about what a sense of belonging means to them.

6. In closing, I will ask the participant to reflect on

   - any changes they have experienced as a group member at the college;
   - their identity as a student;
   - overall barriers they have experienced and/or overcome.
Appendix G Themes Sent to Participants

Dear ….,

Thank you so much for your participation in my study on a sense of belonging for post-secondary students with disabilities. You provided very valuable information about your experience in post-secondary.

I'm writing to invite you to take a few minutes to review the common themes I discovered from the interviews with the study participants.

If you have any questions, concerns or feedback, please feel free to email me within 3 weeks.

I will first provide a review of the purpose and rationale of the study and then describe the interview themes.

Thank you again for your participation. I appreciate the privilege of hearing your story and your insights will contribute to new and transferable knowledge in this field.

**Research Topic: Stories of belonging from post-secondary students with disabilities**

**Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to contribute to an understanding of the belonging experiences of post-secondary students with disabilities. To achieve the purpose of the study, I asked the questions:

1. What stories to students with disabilities tell about a sense of belonging?
2. What do students with disabilities say about the significance of a sense of belonging in their overall post-secondary experience?

**Rationale**

Since we know very little about the topic of belonging for students with disabilities, it is intended that this study will increase awareness and serve to inform institutional policy and practice.

Adding the voices of students with disabilities to the literature advances our understanding of belonging and has the potential to create a shift in institutional narratives. I anticipate that the data, findings, interpretations and recommendations from this study will be transferable and valued by institutional leaders for its impact on inclusivity and belonging.

Institutional leaders are interested in student retention and a sense of belonging is becoming more recognized as a factor contributing to academic motivation and academic retention. New,
in-depth knowledge can affect policy and program implementation for meaningful belonging opportunities on campus.

**Themes:**

**Theme #1: Becoming a Student**

Participants in this study reviewed their highschool experience and expressed that they did not truly know how to be a post-secondary student when they started at college.

Students told stories about learning how to be a student and expressed that it was a “work in progress”.

Student stories related to the theme of "Becoming a Student" included stories about learning new skills such as:

- how to study
- how to write exams
- how to organize
- how to ask for help
- how to manage time

For most participants, learning how to be a student was found to be a foundation for experiencing a sense of belonging.

This sense of belonging in turn positively affected the continued development as a student and academic motivation. Stories also described how a lack of belongingness can adversely affect academic motivation.

**Theme #2 Engagement with Faculty and Peers**

Students told stories related to their interactions with faculty members and peers and how engagement impacted belonging. Stories revealed that the more positive engagement students had with their peers and with faculty, the more they experienced a sense of belonging. Some stories reflected negative interactions with peers/faculty and this negatively affected a sense of belonging.
**Theme #3 Barriers to Belonging**

The theme of Barriers to Belonging takes into account the systemic (institutional barriers such as mandatory full-time programs, taking tests in a segregated space), environmental (for example, noise), physical (for example, chairs and stairs) and attitudinal barriers to experiencing belonging at the College.

Students told stories about barriers they experienced which impacted their sense of belonging at the college. Students also told stories of their resistance to these barriers and how they moved forward with their academic goals to be successful.

**Meaning Students Ascribed to Belonging in a Post-secondary Context:**

- Belonging is “super valuable” because it improves academic motivation.

- Belonging is significant in post-secondary because, not only does it help with staying motivated to complete school work, but it also enhances social relationships and social integration at college.

- Belonging also holds meaning for participants in relation to their success in learning. Some participants indicated that their grades improved when they felt connection and belonging within the class and when they had a friend to study with.

- Overwhelmingly, belonging means “support” for the students in this study.

Thank you again for your participation in this study.

Please feel free to send any feedback, questions, comments, or concerns.

Kind regards,

Trish Foy
Appendix H Feedback from Participants

I received the following three responses from participants regarding themes sent for member checking:

1. **Abigail**: The themes from your work make sense.

2. **William**: The themes appear to be an accurate reflection of my interview.

3. **Alice**: As for your research topic, it looks great and captures everything I felt about belonging. I have no questions about it and I hope it is coming along for you.