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Pathways to Belonging and Engagement: Testing a Tailored Social Belonging Intervention for University Students

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Introduction

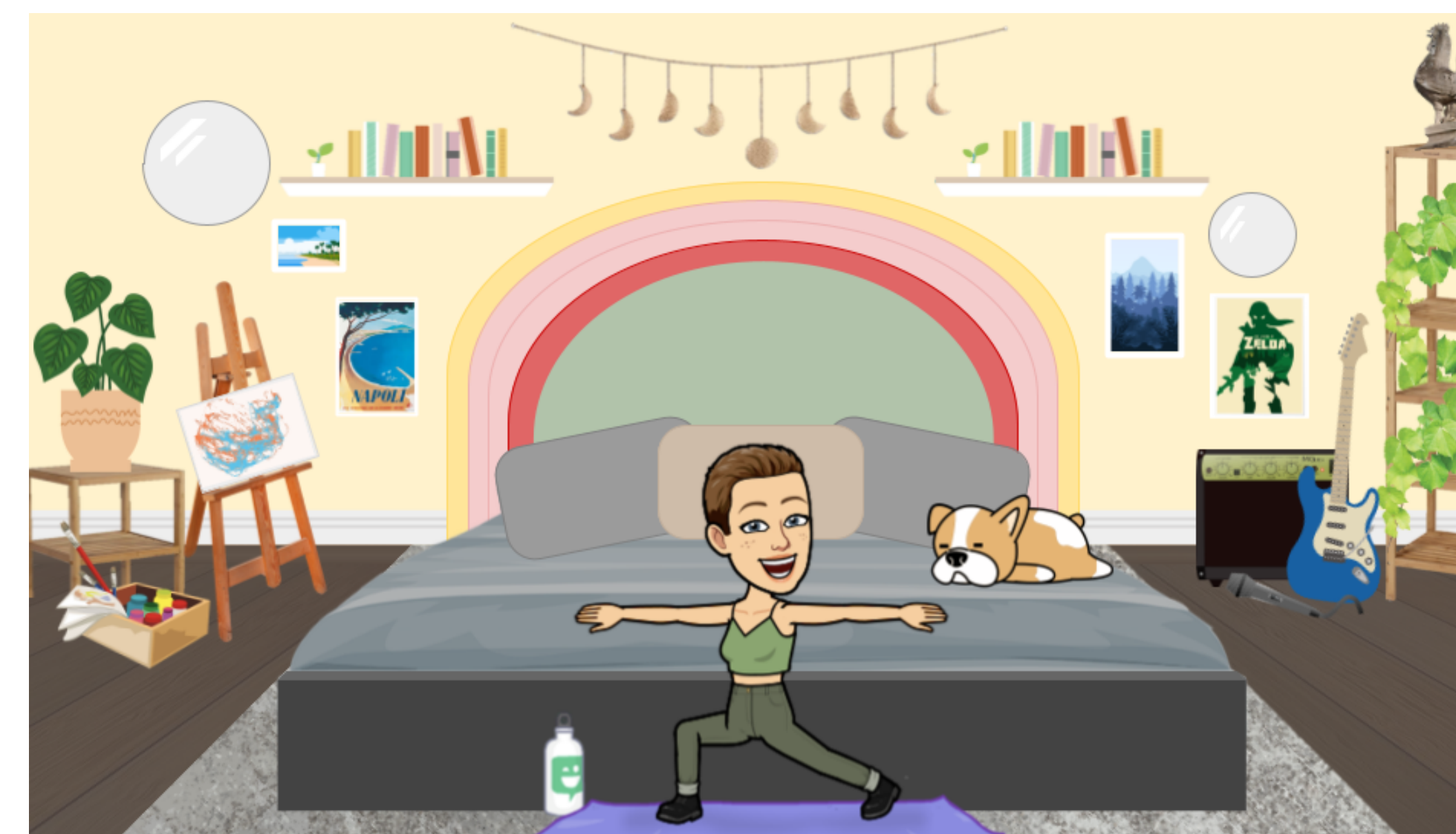
- The need for social belonging – feelings of being accepted, included, respected in, and contributing to a setting (Walton & Brady, 2017)—is a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).
- Traditionally underserved groups in higher education, such as first-generation college students (FGCS) and racial/ethnic minority students, report lower feelings of belongingness in college (Clark et al., 2012; Stebleton et al., 2014).
- Using attributional retraining (Wilson et al., 2002), the social-belonging intervention provides students with counter-narratives to reframe the challenges they experience on campus as typical and with potential to improve.
- Social-belonging interventions have been shown to improve student belonging, well-being, engagement, and more—especially for those from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds (Walton & Brady, 2017; Yeager et al., 2016).
- Existing social-belonging interventions use standardized belonging stories written by researchers (e.g., Broda et al., 2018), limiting authenticity.
- Including diverse upper-level students as fellow researchers in this work has the potential to strengthen the authenticity and effectiveness of the intervention

Method

- Participants ($N=259$) were recruited from first-year courses, randomly assigned to either the experimental or control condition.
- Baseline survey assessing student belonging uncertainty (Walton & Cohen, 2011), student enrollment, achievement, and engagement.

Authentic Belonging Intervention

- Included a series of narratives highlighting social adversity in school as a typical experience that can be improved with effort, resourcefulness, and resilience (Broda et al., 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011).
- Narratives written by a group of diverse, upper-year undergraduates, accompanied by avatars to highlight diverse identities.



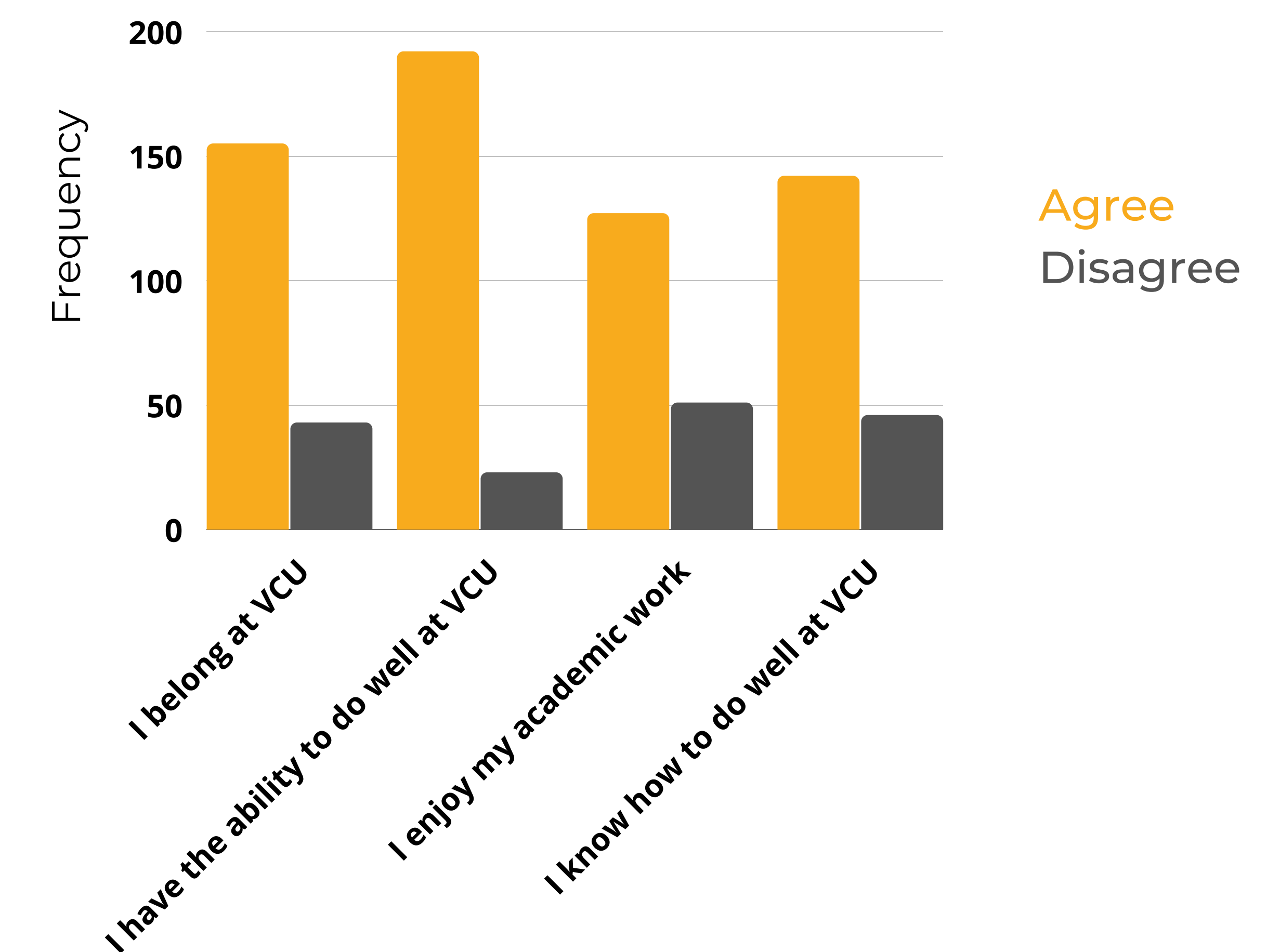
Example of a student avatar

- After reading the narratives, participants wrote a letter to incoming students, illustrated with examples from their experiences, about the ways students might feel initially unsure about their acceptance but ultimately can overcome these fears.
- Control condition: provided students with narratives that focused on effective study skills; participants wrote essays about their experiences of studying in college.

Results

- Approximately 20% of students stated that they worried about their belonging in college at least some of the time.
- 11% of students felt as though they would not fit in at the end of sophomore year, compared to 65% who felt like they would fit in.

Social and Academic Fit



Research Questions

1. Does a tailored social-belonging intervention increase first-year students' belonging, engagement, persistence, and achievement compared to a control group?
2. Do student belonging and engagement serve as moderators of the social-belonging treatment?
3. Do student belonging and engagement serve as mediators of the relationship between the social-belonging intervention and student persistence and achievement?

Implications and Future Research

We will follow students over the next several years, explore perceptions and experiences of students who identify as racial/ethnic minorities, and examine additional relationships between academic help-seeking, mental health help-seeking, belonging, and student well-being on campus.

