CAMPUS CLIMATE & BELONGING

Displaced Learners' Experiences during the Presidential Transition

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Summary of Study and Key Findings

Sense of belonging is a critical factor in the successful integration and well-being of immigrants, influencing their social, psychological, and economic outcomes. A strong sense of belonging contributes to improved mental health, civic engagement, educational attainment, and employment stability among immigrant populations.

From December 2024 through January 2025 the researchers, in collaboration with community partners, developed an 18-question survey aimed at enrolled immigrant college/university students, including multiple sub-questions, that addressed psychological integration, safety on and off campus, sense of belonging, and campus welcome. This study recruited 68 displaced learners who reside in 18 different states and represent 10 different national origins. They are diverse in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, academic program of study, living conditions, length of study in their higher education program, time in the US, and immigration status.

Our key findings, presented below, offer a nuanced perspective on displaced student experiences. Further, they gesture towards with potential areas for intervention on the part of higher education administrators interested in supporting displaced students.

SENSE OF SAFETY

Students were asked about their sense of safety in different spaces, ranging from their immediate living environment, campus, state, and the US. Reported perceptions of safety were distinct across scales—institutional and local contexts afforded greater levels of safety compared to the US broadly. The results show that campus communities may be a protective factor, given that higher levels of safety were reported by participating immigrant learners as they reflected on their various campus environments.

FEELING COMFORTABLE ON CAMPUS

Participants were asked to reflect upon how comfortable they felt in various aspects of campus life in 2025; results are indicated below. 75% of participants felt comfortable with the climate around diversity and inclusion both within their major department and the university at-large. 79% of participants expressed that their campus was a welcoming campus.

RESPECT

Participants were asked a series of questions to determine which characteristics of theirs they believed were respected on their campus. Only about 50% (ranges from 48-54% for each question) of participants felt their race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and immigration status were respected.

Overview

Sense of belonging is a critical factor in the successful integration and well-being of immigrants, influencing their social, psychological, and economic outcomes. A strong sense of belonging contributes to improved mental health, civic engagement, educational attainment, and employment stability among immigrant populations (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Oxman-Martinez et al., 2005). Conversely, a lack of belonging can result in marginalization, social isolation, and diminished opportunities (Ager & Strang, 2008). For displaced students[1], the college campus becomes a central site for cultivating a sense of belonging. Prior research in higher education has shown that a strong sense of belonging can significantly shape educational outcomes (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Among immigrant students at research universities, campus climate is a key predictor of their sense of belonging (Stebleton et al., 2014).

However, there is limited research on belonging among displaced individuals in higher education and the ways in which sociopolitical contexts shape those experiences. Understanding the factors that foster or hinder belonging—such as campus climate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), transition support (Means & Pyne, 2017), culturally affirming spaces (Museus et al., 2017), and peer relationships (Hausmann et al., 2007)—is essential to creating equitable and inclusive campuses.

> *"Although I was admitted to the US legally, and still hold a legal asylee status, I fear deportation."*

This report explores sense of belonging and campus climate among displaced individuals across U.S. higher education institutions. Specifically, focused on the current political moment following the November 2024 election in the United States and the January 2025 inauguration, this analysis considers how shifts in political climate are evaluated by displaced students and the implications for their experiences both on and off campus.

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[1] We use this as an umbrella term encompassing various legal statuses of people with migration histories, understanding legal status as temporally specific (e.g. Unangst et al., 2022)

Data Collection & Analysis

SURVEY

The researchers, in collaboration with community partners, developed an 18-question survey addressing student perceptions of: psychological integration, safety on and off campus, sense of belonging, and campus welcome. These survey constructs draw from diverse sources, offering the reconfiguration of several existing scales.

In relation to psychological integration, Harder et al. (2018) developed a multidimensional measure of immigrant integration, which includes a subscale focused on psychological integration. This subscale was chosen because it is a measure that captures "respondents' feeling of connection with the host country, their wish to continue living there, and their sense of belonging" (p.11484), all of which were of interest to us given the current situation in the USA.

With respect to campus climate, college campuses embody different values, and many times their policies reflect these values. We crafted questions by adapting portions of existing instruments such as the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey administered by the University of California at Berkeley. Additionally, the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) Survey, developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles, offered a foundation for considering public voice on campus .

In building on these prior measures, the authors hypothesized that the election was going to raise levels of fear in immigrant communities based on the history of the first Trump Administration. The President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration was also interested in safety, and specifically how safe students were feeling. Therefore, the team collectively created a short series of questions about safety at various levels.

Survey participants were provided $10 gift cards for participating in the survey.

RECRUITMENT

Study recruitment took place through direct outreach to students who had previously connected with the research team, either as participants in prior studies or given their interest in the topic. In addition, participants were recruited through the partners associated with the President's Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration.

In total, 79 responses were received between December 2024 through January 2025, but only 68 met the eligibility criteria of being foreign born students in higher education and completing the majority of the survey; all questions in the survey were optional. A higher rate of non-response was found for demographic questions. Understandably, survey participants may have been concerned about identifying themselves in this way. Therefore, the data shown below represents the total number of people who answered that specific question.

Survey Participants

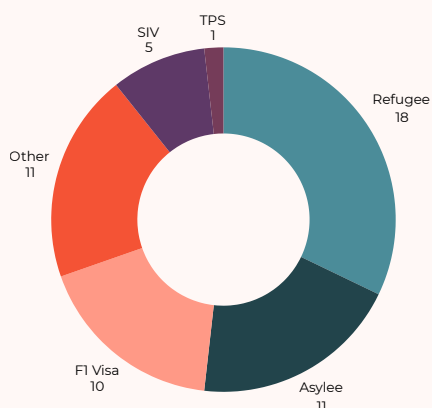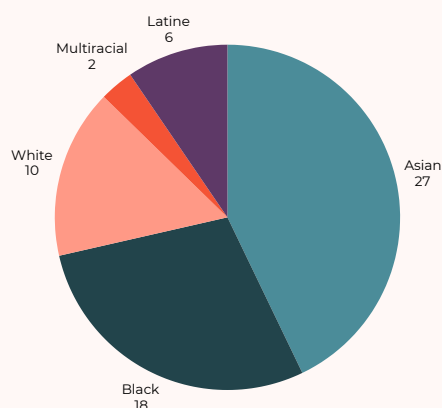*Below we offer some descriptive details regarding the participants*

Total Participants
Total Participants
68
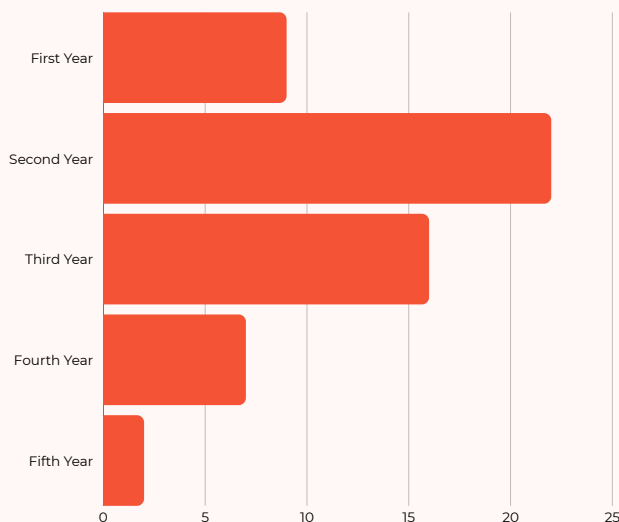
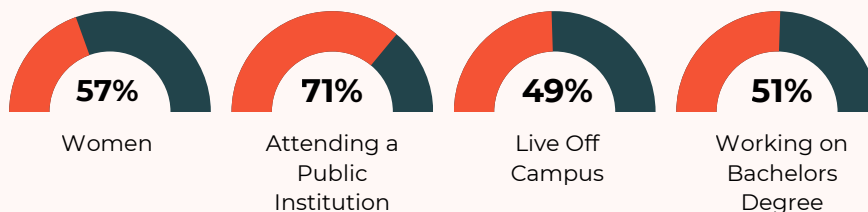**States Represented**
18

Immigration Status:

- TPS 1
- SIV 5
- Other 11
- F1 Visa 10
- Asylee 11
- Refugee 18

Race & Ethnicity:

- Latine 6
- Multiracial 2
- White 10
- Black 18
- Asian 27

Time In Higher Education:

First Year	9
Second Year	22
Third Year	16
Fourth Year	7
Fifth Year	2

0   5   10   15   20   25

Other Key Demographics:

57% Women

71% Attending a Public Institution

49% Live Off Campus

51% Working on Bachelors Degree

CAMPUS CLIMATE FOR REFUGEES 4
CAMPUS CLIMATE FOR REFUGEES 4

SURVEY PARTICIPANT DETAILS

Of the 68 eligible respondents, the group is quite diverse in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, degree program, time in college as well as time in the US.

Gender
39 (57%) self-identified as women, 17 (25%) as men, and the remaining 16 left the question blank.

Race & Ethnicity
27 (43%) self-identified as Asian, 18 (29%) as Black, 10 (16%) as White, and only 2 (3%) as multiracial. Only six (10%) self-identified as Hispanic or Latino.

Academic Program
The sample included 13 (19%) people pursuing an Associate's degree, 35 (52%) working towards their Bachelor's degree, 3 (4%) in certificate programs at institutions of higher education, and 5 (7%) working towards advanced degrees. 48 (71%) attended public colleges and universities. 21(30.9%) lived on campus and 33 (49%) lived off campus.

Time in Higher Education
The majority of respondents were in their second or third year of their higher education program. The sample included 9 (16%) people in their first year at their college/university, 22 (39%) in their second year, 16 (29%) in their third year, 7 (13%) in their fourth year, and 2 (4%) in their fifth year.

Time in the US
The majority of participants in the study had been in the United States for fewer than three years (n=32, 47%) or for longer than seven years (n=13, 19%).

Immigration Status
The sample included students with a variety of immigration and visa statuses as displayed in the following table. The majority of respondents, 18, identified as refugees (26%), followed by a roughly equal proportion of asylees (16%), international students on an F1 Visa (15%), and folks who selected *other* (16%). While *other* could represent many different statuses, the survey intentionally did not ask about undocumented students as a way to protect this population given the current political climate. It is thus possible that some of the people in that group may identify as undocumented learners or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients.

Results

In the section below we share the results from a variety of questions posed in the survey, grouping them by domain.

SENSE OF SAFETY

To understand how safe college students felt, a series of questions probed their sense of safety in different spaces ranging from their immediate living environment to perceptions of campus-, state-level, and US-level safety (Table 1). When compiled together as a scale of overall safety, the participants ranked an average score of 2.17 out of 3 points, showing an overall high level of safety (scale of 0-strongly disagree to 3-strongly agree).

Nonetheless, the number of people who responded "agree" or "strongly agree" to feeling safe is distinct across the local and national scales. Numbers are drastically lower when thinking about the US (n=44) compared to local community levels. Using a one-sample t-test looking at the differences between the mean of safety in the US (1.93) and the mean of safety on campus (2.23), the differences are statistically significant (p = 0.024). This reflects that campus communities may be a protective factor in the level of safety felt by displaced learners.

Notably, these data were collected between December 2024 and January 2025. In subsequent months deportations have risen, including for immigrants residing in the US legally, alongside policy shifts that have eliminated sanctuary spaces. Therefore, the current sense of safety may differ from the data we recorded (e.g., Damiano Pearson, 2025).

Table I. Campus Climate- Sense of Safety		
	Average (SD)	N (%) that agree or strongly agree
I feel safe in my neighborhood (or dorm) right now	2.21 (0.90)	54 (79%)
I feel safe on my campus right now	2.24 (0.90)	53 (78%)
I feel safe as a resident in my state right now	2.26 (0.80)	56 (82%)
Generally speaking, I feel safe in the US right now	1.93 (0.93)	44 (65%)

FEELING COMFORTABLE

Participants were asked to reflect upon how comfortable they felt in various aspects of campus life this year (Table II). The scale started with climate for diversity and inclusion at the classroom level, and then moved to address departmental and institutional levels. The last question probed if the participant felt their campus was a welcoming campus, which 54 participants (79%) agree or strongly agree with.

Table II. Feeling Comfortable on Campus	
	n(%) that strongly agree or agree
Overall, I feel comfortable with the climate for diversity and inclusion in my classes.	49 (72%)
Overall, I feel comfortable with the campus climate for diversity and inclusion in my major.	51 (75%)
Overall, I feel comfortable with the climate for diversity and inclusiveness at my institution.	51 (75%)
My school is a welcoming campus.	54 (79.%)

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTEGRATION

Using the Psychological Integration subscale (Harder et al., 2018), we asked participants to answer a series of four questions about how connected they feel to the US. The average score was 2.2 (standard deviation 0.45) (min score 1.5 and max 3.25 when the scale had options of 0-low integration to 4 high integration), showing that participants have varying levels of connection to the US at this moment in time, rather than a group level consensus.

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY

This series of questions asked students to rate, on a scale of 0 to 3, how their college/university expresses its support for diversity through policies and official actions (Table III). This series included questions about structural supports offered (financial support, bans on hate speech), promotional materials, and institutional values. The average rating for these questions was 2.15 out of 3 (sd=0.39), indicating general agreement that the colleges and universities do support diversity. The table below shows the number of people who selected either "agree" or "strongly agree" to each question, demonstrating that students report that the majority of campuses are doing these things.

The majority of participants reported that they were never bullied on campus/at school events (n=38; 56%) or via text, phone, or social media (n=45; 66%) in the previous month. However, these findings also indicate that many were victimized in these ways in the past month.

One question specifically asked about racial tension on campuses, and a little more than one-third of students (n=27, 40%) expressed that there was racial tension on campus. This may be a product of systemic racism in the US broadly (rather than being about immigration specifically) as a study found that the majority of racially and ethnically minoritized learners on campus experience discrimination, and moreover that the stress of this discrimination leads to lower mental health outcomes (Bravo et al., 2021).

Table III. Institutional Commitment to Diversity	
	n(%) that agree or strongly agree
My college/university encourages students to have a public voice and share their ideas openly	53 (78%)
Has a long-standing commitment to diversity	52 (77%)
Accurately reflects the diversity of its student body in publications (e.g., brochures, website)	52 (77%)
Promotes the appreciation of cultural differences	52 (77%)
Has campus administrators who regularly speak about the value of diversity	49 (72%)
Has a lot of racial tension**	27 (40%)
Provides the financial support I need to stay enrolled	47 (69%)
Has an obligation to prohibit racist and sexist speech on campus	47 (69%)
Has a right to ban extreme speakers from campus	47 (69%)

Note: This question is asked from the opposite point of view of the other questions, and therefore, the results coincide with the others about campus climate.

ENGAGING WITH DIVERSITY

Another series of questions explored how often students took actions reflective of interacting with diverse people in their own lives, both in and outside of the classroom (Table IV). The responses to these questions, with a mean of 1.86 out of 3 and a standard deviation of 0.81 (scale of 0-strongly disagree to 3-strongly agree), were lower than the other measures in this survey. No distinction was found between responses relating to behaviors in the classroom vs. outside the classroom. Our question, regarding how learners "discuss and navigate controversial issues" has notably lower agreement than the other questions in this section, suggesting that when students do engage with diverse viewpoints, they are typically doing so in non-controversial situations. To what extent survey participants are avoiding situations/conversations that might spark controversy -- which they might do for any number of reasons -- is not clear.

We further analyzed the difference between the question regarding how participants "appreciate the world from someone else's perspective: in the classroom" and the question "appreciate the world from someone else's perspective: outside the classroom" using a one-sample t-test. Findings show that there is a statistically significant (p<.001) difference between the mean level at which students appreciate this in the classroom (2.10) than outside of the classroom (2.03) indicating that immigrant and students (including refugees, asylees, and people with other legal statuses) are more able to appreciate the world from other people's perspectives in the classroom as compared with other settings.

Similarly, we compared the mean of "appreciate the world from someone else's perspective: in the classroom" (2.10) and "discuss and navigate controversial issues: in the classroom" (1.6), which was statistically significant (p<.001). This finding indicates that while learners are able to appreciate the world from another person's perspective in the classroom they are less able to navigate disparate controversial issues even within the confines of the classroom.

Table IV. Campus Climate- Engaging with Diversity		
	Average (SD)	n(%) that did this a few or many times
Appreciate the world from someone else's perspective: In the classroom	2.04 (0.95)	45 (66%)
Appreciate the world from someone else's perspective: Outside the classroom	1.89 (1.01)	44 (65%)
Interact with someone with views that are different from your own: In the classroom	2.02 (0.92)	45 (66%)
Interact with someone with views that are different from your own: Outside the classroom	2.00 (0.98)	42 (62%)
Discuss and navigate controversial issues: In the classroom	1.56 (1.08)	36 (53%)
Discuss and navigate controversial issues: Outside the classroom	1.62 (1.05)	34 (50%)

RESPECT

Survey questions about respect were broken into six categories (Table V). When averaging these six questions as a scale of respect, participants' responses had a mean of 2.27 out of 3 points, with a standard deviation of 0.73, indicating a high level of respect (scale of 0-strongly disagree to 3-strongly agree). While answering questions about respect in terms of specific elements of identity were rated similarly, respect for "students of my gender" was notably higher than the others at 2.49, representing an outlier. The sample's demographic makeup was majority female, which reflects broader demographic trends across US college campuses as attendance rates for women are on the rise (England et. al., 2020). Taken together, this suggests that equity and respect for women are highly valued on US college campuses, even though that value is not expressed as strongly in the US as a whole (England et. al., 2020).

The result of the respect for "students of my sexual orientation" was also higher than the others at 2.36, but without information about how the participants describe their own sexual orientations, no further conclusions can be drawn. Respect for my immigration status was the lowest ranking among the options, which aligns with the research team's hypotheses about the current environment and anti-immigrant sentiment of the Trump Administration. There is further analysis on this question below.

Table V. Campus Climate- Respect		
	Average (SD)	n(%) that strongly agree or agree
Students of my race/ethnicity are respected on this campus	2.20 (0.89)	50 (74%)
Students of my socio-economic status are respected on this campus	2.20 (0.89)	51 (75%)
Students of my gender are respected on this campus	2.49 (0.69)	54 (79%)
Students of my religious beliefs are respected on this campus	2.20 (0.89)	50 (74%)
Students of my sexual orientation are respected on this campus	2.36 (0.83)	53 (78%)
Students of my immigration background are respected on this campus	2.20 (0.98)	48 (71%)

Implications

In the section below we will share thoughts on the meaning of and recommendations proposed given the results of the survey

Through this data, we are able to offer a nuanced portrait of displaced learners in US higher education. The mix of immigration statuses represented highlights the range of legal and lived experiences these students bring – revealing a population that is both diverse and resilient.

Given the importance of campus climate as an effective tool for supporting immigrant sense of belonging (e.g., Stebleton, et al, 2014), our analysis focused on how students perceive their campus. Despite the sociopolitical uncertainty surrounding immigration, the majority of students reported feeling relatively safe within their immediate campus environments, with statistically higher perceptions of safety on campus compared to the U.S. as a whole (p = 0.024). This suggests that higher education institutions may serve as relative havens during times of national instability. These data indicate that campus communities may serve as a protective measure for the sense of safety that displaced students feel. As campuses continue to traverse an increasingly hostile climate for immigrants and other displaced persons, this status quo is likely to shift.

While campus can be essential for producing feelings of safety, perceptions of belonging and respect vary significantly. Participants generally offered agreement that their institution supported diversity, as illustrated through promotional materials and institutional values and policies. However, respondents indicated much lower levels of interaction with diverse individuals on those campuses. Particularly, these respondents noted that they have limited experience discussing and navigating controversial topics, illustrating that their interactions with diverse communities are centered around non-controversial issues. In the data, respondents reported high levels of respect related to gender and sexual orientation, yet respect based on immigration background received the lowest rating, aligning with broader anti-immigrant sentiment.

These data were collected between December 2024 and January 2025, and the increasing unpredictability facing displaced students will likely impact future responses. During the period of data collection, these data underscored the protective potential of campus environments for displaced students. For administrators looking to positively support displaced learners, dynamic policy, programming, and public commitment are indicated, through which campuses can affirm the safety and value of all students and ensure institutional practices that explicitly respect and uplift students' immigration statuses.

Beyond working to foster campus safety, a second area for administrators centers the intersection of appreciating diversity and critical engagement with it; this, we argue, points to a need for more intentional curricular intervention and co-curricular programming. The data points to notable levels of bullying— both in person and online— that indicate that inclusion efforts must consider the lived experiences of displaced individuals--distinct from, although at times aligned with--the larger displaced learner community.
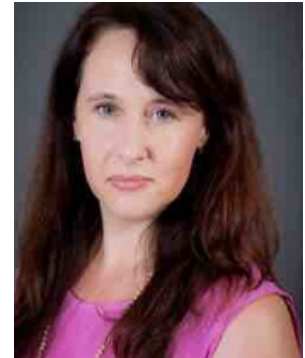
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Ishara Casellas Connors, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Public Service and Administration the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. Her research examines issues related to racial equity in U.S. higher education policy and practice. In this work she examines displaced students, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and Afro-Latin Americans. Dr. Casellas Connors has a diverse background in higher education administration, having previously served as Associate Director for the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University and as Assistant Dean for Diversity at Texas A&M University's College of Geosciences.

Kerri Evans, MSW, Ph.D., LCSW, is an Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, where her research focuses on agency-engaged projects related to the well-being of immigrants. Much of the research focuses on immigrants within the context of the U.S. educational system and ways we can establish a sense of welcome for new immigrant families. Kerri is a licensed social worker and she previously worked in nonprofits with immigrant and refugee children.

Lisa Unangst, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Empire State University. Lisa's research focuses on how displaced learners access and experience higher education, comparative constructions of "diversity" and "equity" across higher education institutions and systems, and international alumni affairs. Previously, Lisa worked at Ohio University and Ghent University. In 2025, she published *Immigrants and refugees at German universities: Diversity, internationalization and anticolonial considerations* with Routledge.

References & Further Readings

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Further reading

The researchers have developed a series of papers and webinars that are available to help individuals interested in learning more about the experiences of displaced students in US higher education. Additional readings are below:

Arar, K. H. (2021). Research on refugees' pathways to higher education since 2010: A systematic review. *Review of Education, 9*(3)

Casellas Connors, I., Unangst, L., & Barone, N. (2023). Supporting displaced students in US higher education: examining institutional policy and practice. *Race Ethnicity and Education,* 1-19.

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MEDIA INQUIRIES

All media inquiries and requests about the contents of this report can be sent to either Dr. Ishara Casellas Connors (icasellasconnors@tamu.edu) or Dr. Kerri Evans (kerrieva@umbc.edu).

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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