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Empathy in action: Developing a sense of belonging with the pedagogy of 'real talk'

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Abstract

A collaborative group of interdisciplinary faculty-researchers at a regional comprehensive university in the United States implemented two pedagogical practices, real talks and alternative lessons (together called the pedagogy of real talk), and investigated students' sense of belonging in classrooms using these practices. Real talks are planned interactions wherein faculty share human stories from their lives on a universal theme and invite students to share their own stories on that theme. Alternative lessons are faculty-designed learning experiences that build upon understandings of students' worldviews and experiences. Survey data from over 30 student classes across two semesters in 2021 were compared with university-wide climate survey data to posit that sense of belonging in these classes was higher than that in the university as a whole. Case study data selected from a repository of faculty descriptions written between 2020 and 2021 further fleshed out examples of specific real talks and alternative lessons. The authors found these practices are particularly significant in their impact on typically underrepresented students, who often contend with feelings of exclusion in their pursuit of higher education.

Practitioner Notes

1. The faculty practice of crafting and sharing stories from their lives and giving students space to share their own stories on the same universal theme (real talks) supports students' sense of belonging.
2. Designing lessons that combine content objectives with students' worldviews or with social and cultural issues important to students (alternative lessons) supports students' sense of belonging.
3. When faculty use their diverse lived experiences and the experiences of their students to increase the relatability of course content, students feel a greater investment in their education, which supports engagement and persistence.
4. Typically underrepresented college students especially benefit from real talks and alternative lessons.
5. An increased sense of belonging motivates students to attend class more consistently, participate in class assignments and activities, and trust their professors enough to communicate with them when they need additional support, either within the academic class or from other support services at the university.

Keywords

Typically underrepresented students, Real talks, Alternative lessons

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Introduction

Creating a classroom climate and culture where students feel safe, known, and valued requires pedagogical practices that develop inclusive, student-centered learning environments (Freire, 1970). Implementation of the *pedagogy of real talk* (PRT) at multiple higher-education institutions has been ongoing since the publication of Paul Hernandez's *The pedagogy of real talk: Engaging, teaching, and connecting with students at risk* (Hernandez, 2015). PRT combines a focus on the delivery of content with an understanding of the student as a whole human being. This study, the first of its kind, seeks to evaluate the pedagogy's impact on students' sense of belonging at a four-year institution.

The study specifically investigates student responses to two central components of the pedagogy: *real talks* and *alternative lessons*. At our regional comprehensive state university, two cohorts of approximately 10 faculty members each participated in a project to develop and assess these two practices. These faculty systematically created, implemented, and collaboratively analyzed their real talks and alternative lessons in monthly meetings and summer retreats over the first two years of a three-year period. The faculty were held to a contractual agreement that stipulated their engagement with the pedagogy, thus ensuring that its implementation was consistent and documented.

Real Talks

The pedagogy of real talk consists of two primary instructional pillars. The first is *real talks*, wherein faculty make themselves vulnerable and human by sharing stories from their own lives on a universally relatable theme and giving students space to share their own stories on that same theme (Hernandez, 2022). Faculty intentionally choose and craft their stories; for example, a professor of exercise science shared a story about completing an ultramarathon with his wife that developed the theme of empathy; students discovered that she had stopped along the way and helped injured competitors. Students were then encouraged to share their own stories of empathy. By initiating this type of dialogue, faculty gain insight into how students experience the world and bring their expertise and worldview into the classroom, and students see their professors as humans beyond the classroom. Through real talks, an environment of connection, understanding, trust, empathy, and caring for one another is established.

Alternative Lessons

The second instructional pillar of PRT is *alternative lessons*, wherein faculty design learning experiences that directly leverage their understanding of their students' worlds gathered during real talks (Hernandez, 2022). Alternative lessons combine content objectives with students' worldviews or with external social and cultural issues important to students. For example, a music professor asked students to suggest a song they liked and a song they disliked and then introduced a new music theory based entirely upon those student suggestions. The shape of these alternative lessons is limited only by the instructor's imagination and a desire to create opportunities that invite all students into the learning process, thereby deepening the connections developed in real talks.

The Pedagogy of Real Talk and Student Belonging

PRT requires faculty to use their diverse lived experiences and the experiences of their students to increase the relatability of course content so students feel a greater sense of investment in their

education. Likewise, this approach revises the faculty-student relationship. In contrast to a strictly hierarchical academic environment, students feel as though they are part of a community of scholars within the classroom and equipped to engage each other's unique perspectives. For typically underrepresented students, the opportunity to contribute to the classroom in dialogue with classmates and instructors can transform their sense of belonging (Freire, 1970; Hernandez, 2022).

This article quantifies and describes student responses to PRT, with a focus on real talks and alternative lessons, through a mixed-methods approach that includes case studies and survey data. The faculty-researchers examined students' perceptions of belonging and the effects on their academic experiences in PRT classes. Analysis of longitudinal climate survey data alongside data from student surveys indicates an increased sense of belonging in these classes compared with that of the overall student population. While existing research emphasizes the importance of students' perceptions of faculty caring (Freeman et al., 2007; Maestas et al., 2007), it does not evaluate specific pedagogical practices that support such relationships. This study seeks to address this gap, offering more specific models for creating a classroom climate that supports students' sense of belonging.

Literature Review

This review of the literature, firstly, presents definitions for belonging and raises the importance of examining belonging in the academic classroom and the college as a whole. Student-faculty relationships and student support services are evaluated, although not all research on belonging treats the two separately (Hoffman & Morrow, 2003; Maestas et al., 2007). Our work seeks to address that gap and explore the impact of implementing the pedagogy of real talk (PRT), the foundation of which is the faculty-student relationship.

Secondly, this review examines the importance and experience of belonging among typically underrepresented student groups, including: students with lower socioeconomic status, first-generation college students, LGBTQ+ students, and students of colour, as well as students with mental health needs. Many students have identities that encompass more than one of these underrepresented groups. Thus, research on belonging, while benefiting all students, is especially relevant to creating supportive environments for underrepresented students.

Lastly, the impact of Covid-19 has exacerbated underlying mental health issues at most universities, and this is especially the case at ours, as it has also precipitated a drop in student attendance and persistence. Accordingly, the authors explore how a supportive environment, in which belonging is strong, is tied to overall persistence, as well as students' decisions to remain in a class or even at their college.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging in an academic setting is defined as an individual's conceptualization of connectedness to the campus community. This connectedness is often a result of social interactions or the overall environment of the institution. Definitions of "sense of belonging" in college are framed around the subjective feelings of students (Maestas et al., 2007), students' perception of feeling generally included in a college community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), or the successful integration of students within the institutional system (Hoffman & Morrow, 2003). Even in situations where individuals feel a sense of belonging, that feeling varies based on sometimes-changing external

factors. A need to belong, or how to satisfy that need, is also dependent on individual preference (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Students' sense of belonging, then, is highly contextualized.

Existing literature unpacks several areas of belonging within the college experience, including: social interactions with friends, interactions with professors, classroom environments, and availability of student support services and even course offerings (Ingram, 2012). Thus, a sense of belonging on a college campus requires investigation through a variety of lenses or sub-contexts. However, the majority of existing literature does not distinguish between one's sense of belonging in the classroom and one's sense of belonging at the college as a whole.

Moreover, studies on the sense of belonging among students in secondary schools suggest that students require "relatedness" to feel as though they are connected to their social surroundings (National Research Council, 2004) and that their teachers care about them (Smerdon, 2002). Similarly, at the college level, student relationships with faculty have an impact on their feeling of belonging. Students who felt as though professors were pedagogically caring (Freeman et al., 2007) and that professors took interest in them (Meastas et al., 2007) were more likely to develop a sense of belonging on college campuses.

Belonging and Typically Underrepresented Students

Socioeconomic, as well as racial and ethnic characteristics, play a significant role in a student's sense of belonging, and many predominantly white institutions seeking to diversify their student population (such as ours) have established initiatives to create a welcoming community. Typically underrepresented college students often question if they belong as individuals, or even members of a group, at such institutions (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Meanwhile, white students report a higher sense of belonging than any other ethnic group (Johnson et al., 2007), supporting the prevailing notion that race and ethnicity, regardless of other sub-contexts, are significant factors. In some cases, students expressed a sense of "belonging uncertainty," where they felt as though negative events on campus caused them to question their belongingness (Johnson et al., 2007).

While similar studies have been conducted on the impact of socioeconomic status and "sense of belonging," existing literature does not provide as definitive a correlation between lower income students and lower sense of belonging (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). Some research suggests that existing and proposed solutions to support belongingness of typically underrepresented groups (including both low-income students and students of colour), as well as policy recommendations, rely on a "one size fits all" approach that ignores the different experiences and needs of low-income students and students of colour (Pendakur, 2016).

Students of colour frequently experience uncertainty about their belonging in college settings. Walton & Cohen (2007) examined the effects of social stigmatization on a student's social belonging, hypothesizing that members of socially stigmatized groups might be more vulnerable and uncertain about belonging. Through their study with African-American students who were pursuing computer science degrees in a predominantly white institution, their research suggests "belonging uncertainty" contributes to racial disparities in academic and professional settings. Belonging uncertainty may not be predicated on fear of being stereotyped or being subjected to racial bias, but perhaps on the broader concern that people from a racial identity group do not belong in a particular educational institution or field of study.

As is true with the population of college students as a whole, students of colour benefit from perceived positive relationships with professors. Mina et al. (2004) found that students of colour

were more likely than their white counterparts to question whether a professor respected them or felt as though they belonged in their classrooms, thus contributing to a lower level of feeling of belonging. Conversely, a caring faculty mentor was found to significantly relate to the comfort of underrepresented students on campus and decreased their likelihood of being negatively impacted by situations of adversity (Bok & Bowen, 1999; Dayton et al., 2004; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005).

LGBTQ+ students have greater obstacles than the general population of college students in regards to perceptions of belonging and school climate. While their experiences have improved over time, they continue to encounter homophobia and issues of lack of visibility in course content and marketing materials, and they do not always have access to dedicated student-support services specializing in issues that this population specifically faces (Ellis, 2009). One approach that has proven successful has been to provide safe spaces on university campuses designated for LGBTQ+ students (Ecker & Bassi, 2015; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). The helpfulness of these spaces further demonstrates the additional need for belonging experienced by these students.

Belonging, Covid-19, and Mental Health

Students who experience mental health issues are another demographic who may feel a sense of isolation and a lack of belonging. Mental health is a factor that can contribute to students' choices about remaining in a course or at the institution as a whole. In recent years, pre-pandemic, reported mental health issues among college students were already rising. According to a French study (Boujut & Bruchon-Schweitzer, 2009), 27, 18, and 3% of college students suffer from mild, moderate and severe depression, respectively. Mental health issues experienced by college students manifest as depression, anxiety, stress, and sleeping disorders (Saleh et al., 2017). Some of these numbers have increased due to increased mental health resources on campus and student willingness to seek help.

During COVID, these numbers have risen considerably, with the pandemic as the likely cause (Khan et al., 2020).¹ Additional mental health issues considered potential risks for college students included: excessive stress, posttraumatic stress disorder, psychological panic, posttraumatic growth disorder, psychological distress, emotional self-management disorder, suicidal tendency, insomnia, somatization, and fatigue (Li et al., 2021).

Fruehwirth et al. (2021) found that in first-year students, rates of moderate-severe anxiety increased 40%, and rates of moderate-severe depression increased 48% from before to mid-pandemic. Further, they found the intersections of certain demographic factors with COVID showed increased mental health issues. For instance, in LGBTQ+ students, moderate-severe anxiety increased 59%, and moderate-severe depression increased 50%, while, for Black students, social isolation due to COVID contributed to an 89% increase in depression. Social isolation in turn affected students' sense of belonging.

The Impact of Belonging on Retention in Higher Education

A further consideration is the impact of belonging on retention and graduation. When students are able to complete their four-year education, they have a better chance of attaining economic stability (Carter & Welner, 2013). However, current programs that result in increased admission of

¹ For a focus on community college students, see: Lipson, S.K., Phillips, M.V., Winquist, N., Eisenberg, D., & Lattie, E.G. (2021). Mental health conditions among community college Students: A National study of prevalence and use of treatment services. *Psychiatric Services*, 72(10), 1126-1133. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.202000437>.

typically underrepresented students only partially alleviate the problem. Completion of degree programs is required for the opportunity gap to narrow.

University retention rates are therefore a significant concern for institutions such as ours, especially as research continues to support the contention that a college degree improves the likelihood of upward mobility (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2019; Carter & Welner, 2013). Thomas (2012) investigated the impact of student sense of belonging on student retention and found that student satisfaction with higher education was dependent upon student sense of belonging that could be established through meaningful interactions between faculty, staff and peers.

It is all the more important, then, to shift students' sense of belonging within the classroom and as they navigate the complex systems of higher education (Hernandez, 2022). Students who do not feel as though they belong at an institution are less likely to navigate support systems that ease common obstacles to attaining a degree, and they are less inclined to reach out to their professors for academic support (Hernandez 2015; Osher & Kendziora, 2010). Conversely, a strong sense of belonging can yield positive outcomes such as an increase in well-being and sense of achievement, especially for African American students (Strayhorn, 2012).

Methods

In this mixed-methods study, we examined student responses to the pedagogy of real talk (PRT). The data collection methods were fully vetted by the university's institutional review board (IRB). Because the data is anonymized, and the research takes place in a commonly accepted educational setting and involves normal educational practices, the IRB considered the research "exempt" under the U.S. code of federal regulations (45 CFR 46.101 (b)(1)). Quantitative data included two semesters of student survey data from the calendar year 2021 collected across more than 30 courses and spanning multiple content areas, as well as university-wide longitudinal climate survey data from 2018 and 2020. To analyze these data, we examined survey responses related to belonging, performed selected correlation studies, and isolated responses from students who self-identified as members of typically underrepresented groups. Qualitative data derived from our collective repository of real talks and alternative lessons; the authors identified trends found within the quantitative data and selected case studies that would serve as representative examples of student responses as they related to sense of belonging.

Setting and Implementation of the Pedagogy of Real Talk

The university at which this research was conducted offers over 30 undergraduate degree programs and 22 master's degree programs in 14 academic departments. The institution enrolls a student population composed of students typically underrepresented in higher education. Of full-time undergraduate students, many are the first in their family to attend college (38%), PELL recipients (40%), commuters (65%), or identify as part of a U.S. minority group (32%). Among our secondary feeder schools, economically disadvantaged students at two local high schools drop out of school at a rate of 9.1%, almost three times the state average for economically disadvantaged students (Fitchburg State University, 2020). Moreover, the 2020 American Community Survey for the region (United States Census Bureau, 2020) estimates only 25% of residents have earned a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 45% of residents statewide.

Incorporating PRT into the curriculum was methodical and intentional. Two cohorts of roughly 10 faculty members (20 total) participated in successive summer workshops where they learned about PRT, discussed the challenges that their students face in feeling a sense of belonging at the

institution, and practiced developing real talks and alternative lessons. Following the first summer workshops, the participating faculty members met monthly throughout the academic year, attended online workshops with faculty members from other institutions engaged in the same pedagogical work, and then attended a second week-long summer workshop. The principle underlying this process is that creating long-lasting change requires consistent and routine revisiting of goals and processes in a collaborative setting.

After robust discussion and feedback provided through an informal peer review process, faculty members incorporated at least two real talks and three alternative lessons into their courses, when and where they saw fit. Some faculty members opted to integrate the pedagogy into all of their courses while others focused on one or two. The courses in which the pedagogy was applied ranged across the disciplines and included first year experience courses, introductory courses within a specific discipline, as well as upper-level seminars.

Data Collection and Analysis

The authors make use of two sets of quantitative survey data. University-wide data came from the institution's climate survey, which was administered in 2018 and 2020; these surveys track the aggregated responses of students, faculty and librarians, and staff and administrators. The institution chose the limited disaggregation of students by "white" and "students of colour," which can make assessing the needs of typically underrepresented students challenging. In both years, students of colour comprised a weighted average of 15% of respondents -- this despite the fact that, in self-reported data collected in our Common Dataset, students of colour make up roughly one third of the overall student body, with the percentages of Hispanic/LatinX and African-American students comprising some 25% of the students. Moreover, in 2018, only 7% of the student body responded to the survey, while in 2020 the student response rate rose to over 20%.²

The second set of quantitative data derived from surveys devised by the faculty employing PRT in consultation with Dr. Hernandez. Self-reported student perceptions were compiled and scored for each participant, along with cumulative scores correlated with several variables (e.g., anticipated persistence, student performance, and sense of belonging); 462 student respondents completed 36 questions that covered the classroom environment, the student experience, course content, mental health and Covid-related issues. Additionally, descriptive statistics were used to gauge the demographic distribution of the entire sample; the survey requested students to identify gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, age, and credit completion. This demographic information then allowed us to draw conclusions from distinct populations (i.e., students of colour and LGBTQ+ students), following the university's method of disaggregation in the climate survey.

Students' perceptions of belonging in these surveys included Likert scale responses to statements such as:

- The classroom had a positive atmosphere.
- The learning environment was inclusive.
- I was treated with respect.
- I was cared about as an individual.
- The learning environment enabled me to express my ideas comfortably.

² Student participation varied considerably over the two instances. In 2018, only 258 students participated, but in 2020 that number grew by more than 150% to 669; it is important to note, as well, that our overall enrollments shrank by nearly 500 full-time equivalencies (FTEs) in this time period. See <https://www.fitchburgstate.edu/about/why-fitchburg-state/institutional-research-and-planning/institutional-data>

- This course inspired me to work to support my classmates and their learning. (To review the entire text of the PRT surveys, see Appendix A.)

The qualitative component of the study afforded the opportunity for a more nuanced portrait of faculty implementation of real talks and alternative lessons, as well as student responses to these. As part of the faculty's contractual agreement in participating in the three-year PRT cohort, they were required to submit written descriptions of two real talks and three alternative lessons each semester to a shared repository. We reviewed these written descriptions for occurrences of the topic of student belonging and selected examples representative of student experiences described in the collection.

Findings: Survey Data

Data presented in this section come from two sources: a university-wide climate survey, given in 2018 and 2020, that reflects the responses of students across the university; and a specific survey given to students who were taking classes with faculty participating in the pedagogy of real talk (PRT) given at the end of the Spring 2021 semester and the Fall 2021 semester. The university-wide survey gives a useful backdrop about belongingness experienced by students at the university overall, and the specific PRT survey provides information about student experiences in courses using the PRT, which focused on creating relationships between faculty and students and on offering lessons designed to relate to students' lives and interests.

University-Wide Student Survey Data

The 2018 climate survey, given prior to the implementation of PRT, had troubling markers regarding belonging (see Table 1). The data revealed, for instance, that in the aggregate 75% of students felt they belonged at the institution, but when disaggregated only 63% of students of colour felt this way. These measurements of belonging mirrored how much students felt their instructors cared about them: in the aggregate, 77% of students felt their instructors cared about them as individuals, but among students of colour only 69% agreed. The data comports with faculty conceptions of their own attentiveness to student needs. For instance, in 2018, 67% of faculty and librarians felt they were sensitive to the needs of all students, and 70% of the aggregated students felt the same; however, when disaggregated, only 57% of students of colour agreed. Response rates themselves function as an indicator of student engagement, if not "belonging." In the 2018 climate survey, only 14% of student respondents were students and staff/faculty of colour, when the overall population of students of colour was more than 30% of the student population.³

The 2020 administration of the climate survey showed improvement in student response rates (from 7% in 2018 to over 20% in 2020), even as in the aggregate many of the measurements of belonging barely budged. For instance, a slightly higher percentage of all students cited a sense of belonging, whereas a slightly lower percentage felt that their instructors cared about them. Among students of colour, more — by some ten percentage points — cited a sense of belonging than in 2018, and more students of colour said faculty cared about them than in the overall sample. While the improvements in student sense of belonging from 2018 to 2020 are heartening, these surveys continue to indicate that more improvements are needed in this area.

³ In 2018, the number of respondents who identified as non-white or students of colour totaled only 36, which gives the authors pause about the statistical validity of any conclusions.

Table 1:
2018 and 2020 University-Wide Climate Surveys

	2018		2020		Change in response from 2018-2020	
	All Students/ Faculty	Students of Colour	All Students/ Faculty	Students of Colour	All Students/ Faculty	Students of Colour
Students who felt they belonged at the institution	75%	63%	76%	73%	+3%	+10%
Students who felt instructors cared for them	77%	69%	76%	78%	+1%	+9%
Faculty who felt they were sensitive to the needs of students	67%		70%		+3%	
Students who felt faculty were sensitive to the needs of students	70%	57%	73%	70%	+3%	+13%

The limited data from the climate surveys points out the need for more comprehensive and nuanced datasets measuring students' sense of belonging, particularly in those classes where faculty employed the pedagogy of real talk. Consequently, faculty participating in PRT deployed the student survey described below. Initial conclusions about the data derived from the Spring 2021 term were subsequently reinforced in the Fall of the same calendar year.

Pedagogy of Real Talk Student Survey Data

To assess the pedagogy's effectiveness, the faculty members designed a 36-question course evaluation survey for the students in PRT classes (again, see Appendix A). This survey focused on how well the class fostered a sense of connection and belonging for the students. Several prompts on a five-point Likert scale (where 1 is "strongly disagree" and 5 is "strongly agree") were designed to address student sense of belonging, specifically the prompt, "the learning environment was inclusive," which was further explained by a footnote stating that, in an inclusive environment, people of all cultural backgrounds can "freely express who they are, their own opinions, and points of view; fully participate in teaching, learning, work, and social activities; feel safe from abuse, harassment, or unfair criticism."

In both the spring and fall survey data, which drew on responses from 462 students across 33 courses, we found strong indicators of positive student responses to PRT, with particularly positive correlations between how the students experienced the PRT classroom and the sense that the

instructor created an inclusive learning environment. For instance, students felt faculty had created a positive atmosphere, treated them with respect, had seen them as individuals, and cared about each individual as a person.⁴ What was true of the individual was also true of the group: students felt strongly that their peers were respected and that all voices could be heard.⁵ Moreover, strong and statistically significant correlations existed between these measurements of students' individual and collective experiences of the classroom and their sense that the learning environment was inclusive, while similar correlations existed between these measurements and the sense that they and their peers could express their ideas.⁶

Situating the PRT student survey data in the context of the university-wide survey data, students in PRT classrooms felt greater levels of indicators of belongingness, including perceptions of how caring their professors were. The two university-wide climate surveys from 2018 and 2020 showed that 75-76% of students felt that they belonged at the institution, and 76-77% of students felt that their instructors cared about them. The surveys of students taught by PRT faculty showed that in courses utilizing PRT, 88% of students across both semesters either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that they were "cared about as a person," and 87% either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that "the learning environment enabled me to express my ideas comfortably." Thus, students in PRT classrooms were 10 percentage points more likely to state that their professors cared for them and, while the survey questions were worded slightly differently, 10 percentage points more likely to experience belonging, in so far as they were comfortable expressing ideas. This increased sense of belonging is also supported by spontaneous comments by students in response to participating in the real talks.

The relationships between PRT and substantial participation in class as well as typical measurements of student success, such as persistence and commitment to continuing their education, are strong. For instance, one half of students surveyed reported asking questions or contributing to class, and an even larger percentage reported communicating with the instructor. Strong majorities of students were also receptive to feedback and their peers' diverse opinions.⁷

⁴ The measurements were taken on a five-point Likert scale, and in each of the four cases the mode was always overwhelmingly a 5, or "strongly agree." This held true in the first administration of the survey in the Spring term, as well as in the larger dataset of both terms. In the Spring, for the question on positive atmosphere, 90 of 122 (or 74%) of respondents strongly agreed; the follow-on three questions saw ratios of 100:122 (82%), 93:121 (77%), and 88:120 (73%), respectively; in the combined dataset of both Spring and Fall, the ratios of those who strongly agreed were 301:461 (65%), 350:461 (76%), 316:459 (69%), 307:459 (67%), respectively.

⁵ Again, the mode for both of these collective measurements was overwhelmingly a 5, or "strongly agree," whether accounting for respect paid to all students or having everyone's voice heard: for the former, the ratio of 5's was 346:459 (or 75%), and for the latter it was 312:460 (68%).

⁶ The correlation coefficient (r) was above 0.7 in all of these relationships, and in several it topped 0.8. The p -values were consistently <0.05 . The survey, moreover, glossed the notion of an "inclusive environment" as a space in which "people of all cultural backgrounds can: freely express who they are, their own opinions, and points of view; fully participate in teaching, learning, work, and social activities; feel safe from abuse, harassment, or unfair criticism."

⁷ For "asking questions or contributing to class," the modal response (a ratio of 136:461, or 30%) was a neutral 3, or "neither agree nor disagree"; a slim majority (237:461, or 51%) selected "agree" and "strongly agree." The modal response for "communicating with the instructor" was 4, or "agree" (146:462, or 32%), but here those who agreed or strongly agreed comprised a solid majority (270:462, or 58%). For both "feedback" and "diverse opinions," the mode was 5 (with ratios of 242:462 or 52% and 270:461 or 59%); those who agreed or strongly agreed for feedback and diverse opinions comprised 84% (390:462) and 88% (404:461), respectively.

Moreover, in terms of anticipated persistence, students indicated that they were strongly inclined to continue with their education and pursue lifelong learning.⁸

Typically underrepresented students responded positively to the pedagogy. Among those students self-identifying as LGBTQ+, a strong consensus existed that within the classroom faculty had created a positive atmosphere, treated them with respect, had seen them as individuals, and cared about each individual as a person; and, again, what was true of the individual went for the group, as they also perceived their classmates were treated similarly.⁹ Likewise, among those who broadly self-reported as “students of colour,” the correlations between these several perceptions and the inclusive PRT classroom were as strong as those for all 462 respondents.¹⁰ Clearly, these two groups of students represent a large portion of those whom PRT seeks to reach and engage. While we did not disaggregate responses to represent economically disadvantaged students, we used contextual data about the university population as a whole to infer that, since 40% of the students at the university are PELL grant recipients, the students in the study would be made up of a similar proportion. Likewise, we expect that approximately 38% were first-generation college students, based on university-wide data.

Findings: Case Study Data

In addition to the student survey data on questions of belonging, the case study data presents examples of a real talk and an alternative lesson. These examples were taken from a repository of written descriptions of over 35 real talks and alternative lessons each, made up of two to three examples of each, per semester, per faculty member. These particular examples are offered for the relevance to students’ experience of belonging; however, many other examples from the repository also demonstrated clear connections with belonging. Rather than compile a summative list of real talks and alternative lessons, we chose to flesh out two examples, in order to provide detailed illustrations of how these approaches took form in two particular classes. Again, these approaches were used across disciplines. The faculty who participated in this research teach in various content areas: exercise science, education, English and journalism, history, music, and political science.

Real Talk: Take Care of Yourself

One of the authors of this article, Kisha Tracy, designed a real talk and gave it for the first time in Fall 2020 to online, synchronous courses in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequently in in-person courses. In the introduction and discussion of the syllabus in the second class meeting of the semester, one of the aspects that she emphasized was a list of guidelines designed to increase student success in the course. The first “rule” was “take care of yourself mentally and physically.”

⁸ The modal answer for persistence was a 5, or “strongly agree” (230:459, or 50%), but those who both agreed and strongly agreed comprised 77% (353:459). The modal answer for lifelong learning was a 5, or “strongly agree” (173:459, or 38%), and once again those who agreed and strongly agreed comprised 65% (299:459).

⁹ This subset of students comprised a little less than a quarter of all those surveyed: 108 out of 462, or 23%. The modal experience was always a 5, or “strongly agree.” However, the correlation coefficient (or r value) was in each case in excess of 0.8, sometimes approaching a 0.9, while the p -value remained below 0.05.

¹⁰ Some 84 of 462 respondents, or 18%, self-identified as “students of colour,” or “non-white.” Once again, the modal experience was always a 5, or “strongly agree,” and the correlation coefficient (or r value) for the six relationships was in each case in excess of 0.7, while the p -value remained <0.05.

When students reached that part of the syllabus, Dr. Tracy took the opportunity to fold a real talk into the conversation. In this talk, she revealed a portion of her own personal history and experiences with mental health, particularly during graduate school and during diagnosis. These anecdotes were then applied to the introduction of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, reviewing each level and how they are related to everyday life and to learning. During the pandemic, Dr. Tracy emphasized the prevalence of individuals struggling to meet the basic needs level, which makes reaching the levels in which learning can take place all the more challenging. From here, the discussion turned to strategies for taking care of mental health, encouraging students to share what works for them. Throughout the rest of the semester, Dr. Tracy then made repeated reference to the first "rule" as well as resources and events on campus, sometimes through formal discussion in class and, at other times, through informal posts and memes on the class social media group.

Student responses to the real talk over successive semesters were very positive:

I appreciate your willingness to share your personal story in order to try and help your students. (Student Questionnaire, Spring 2022)

[T]hank you for being so open about mental health. (Student Questionnaire, Fall 2021)

Thank you for having my back. (Student Email, Fall 2021)

I just wanted to email you to show my gratitude for your transparency about your mental health and giving information for the tools we have at our disposal on campus. After our first day of class, you made me aware of the free counseling services on campus, and I immediately utilized it. I had a mission of finding a counselor whilst moving out here, and it was presented to me in the first class I attended. I really appreciate that. You are making differences in people's lives, and I am certain you will continue to. (Student Email, Spring, 2022)

Qualitatively, this strategy immediately resonated with students. In online sections as well as in-person, students remained after class to comment on the conversation, and some shared that they too experienced mental health issues. They also expressed concern for the instructor, asking more about the journey and the diagnosis, creating a sense of empathy and shared understanding among the cohort. A follow-on private "Getting to Know You" questionnaire provided an opportunity to share any information about themselves.

After the introduction of this real talk, the number of students disclosing mental health issues increased considerably, but so too did a sense of positivity. For instance, one student in Fall 2021 shared: "[I am d]efinitely [concerned about] balancing commitments and staying motivated due to mental health, but with your resources I feel a lot better!" This positive outlook is a first step in lowering barriers to learning and ultimately finishing a course.

In some cases, this positivity had a projected influence over further career choices. A student in Fall 2021 chose to email the instructor at the end of the course to note such an influence: "I am being completely honest when I say I have only ever had ONE other professor who actually cared about her students as much as you do -- academically, and personally. You have helped me tremendously, whether or not you feel you did! So, in short, thank you for becoming a (phenomenal) professor (and for being a great human being in general), and I hope to become as good of a teacher as you one day."

In this case, the real talk pedagogy addressed a major concern among college students, a concern that has increased during Covid-19, by creating a sense of empathy and a community of caring in the classroom. By participating in this particular real talk at the beginning of the semester, students were encouraged to reveal issues affecting their learning and overall performance in the course, mental health and otherwise, increasing the likelihood of success.

Alternative Lesson: Notice the Ordinary

Wendy Keyser, another author of this article, designed a “50 Words” Alternative Assignment that fostered belongingness in an introductory writing class. For this assignment, students began by reading a number of short pieces from the Boston *Globe* newspaper written by local residents, capturing a moment of everyday life in just 50 words. Students selected examples, discussed what they liked about them, and deductively came up with a list of guidelines or strategies to write their own. Students said they appreciated how current this writing was: this was the Fall of 2020, and many examples alluded to the drastic changes wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic. After writing and revising three of their own “50 Words” pieces, students added explanations of the strategies from the model pieces they adapted to their own material. Students shared their pieces with one another in small groups as well as with the whole group.

One strategy students tried to emulate was starting the description in one vein but breaking the reader’s expectations by the end. The example came from Diana Arezzo on July 12, 2020 (Boston *Globe*):

I’m riding shotgun, next to an experienced Boston driver, when he zooms headfirst into a parking space bordering the Common, stealing it from a black sedan. The sedan backs up, signaling for me to roll down the window. I fear for my life. His comment on the theft? “Well done.”

Students liked the humor and good will that came from the driver’s unexpected reaction. One student adopted this strategy to describe waking up late and rushing around to get ready for school, only to realize it was Saturday. Students observed the seeming ordinariness of the 50 Words, moments that might easily be forgotten if it were not for the writer’s attention to meaning. One student used this insight to write a vivid description of a wet bee landing on her backpack during an outdoor class meeting, then leaving when its wings were dry enough to land in the grass.

This alternative assignment allowed students to share whatever degree of personal vulnerability felt comfortable for them, and many were eager to learn about one another as well as to share tidbits of their own lives in these early days in the semester, especially as they were beginning their first year of college and resuming in-person learning at the same time. It set the scene for students’ willingness and interest in bringing their experiences into their writing in future, longer assignments: one student, a veteran, wrote about the way he used the internet to connect with family and friends and stave off loneliness when he was posted overseas. Another woman wrote about a racist experience she endured as a child and the pride and support she felt when her mother confronted an ice cream vendor who had refused to serve her a cone.

These students developed enough trust, both for the professor and their classmates, that they had the courage to revisit difficult experiences and translate them into authentic pieces of writing to share with both their peer readers and the professor. Grounding the course in the “50 Words” exercise demonstrated that ordinary, authentic and seemingly simple moments are the grist for both good writing and community building.

Discussion

Overall, this study shows that the pedagogy of real talk (PRT) strategies of real talks and alternative lessons supported a sense of belonging in students. For the students, getting to see a human and relatable side of their professors through the real talks strengthened the degree of trust and supported the student perception faculty cared about them. Faculty in various disciplines teaching at various course levels were able to implement the pedagogy through simple yet meaningful modifications. The nine faculty members in this group teach in the fields of education, English, exercise science, history, music, journalism, and political science, and all have seen positive results with the incorporation of PRT. Implications for pedagogical practice and policy stem from these positive findings.

Belonging and the Pedagogy of Real Talk

Returning to the definition of belonging as an individual’s conceptualization of connectedness to the campus community, the survey and qualitative data reveal that the pedagogy of real talk correlated with students’ perceptions of connectedness. Specifically, survey responses in which students felt faculty had created a positive atmosphere, treated them with respect, had seen them as individuals, and cared about each individual as a person reveal students’ experience of relationship with their professors. Building on Freeman et al. (2007) and Meastas et al. (2007), who determined that students who perceived that their professors were caring and took an interest in them were more likely to experience sense of belonging at college, we suggest that employing real talks and alternative lessons contributed to students’ positive experiences of their relationships with faculty, and thus increased their likelihood of experiencing belonging at college. The addition of specific strategies to achieve students’ sense of meaningful connection with faculty offers a tangible way for professors to work towards creating these positive relationships.

Examining real talks first, their premise is that the professor shares a life story that communicates a human experience and connects to a common, relatable theme. In the repository of descriptions of real talks, a common experience described by faculty was that students approached them after the talk to discuss their own lives as they related to the topic of the talk. Thus, it was the openness and planned vulnerability of the professor, carefully shaped into a story shared with students, that contributed to developing a trusting student-faculty relationship. This pedagogical approach bridges the amorphous goal of demonstrating caring towards students with a strategy that opens up opportunities for the expression of this caring. In fact, the strategy is even somewhat counterintuitive: demonstration of caring seems on its face to be outwardly directed, only towards and about the student; but in fact, the success of real talks shows that it is the ability to direct attention both inwardly and outwardly, sharing one’s own story while showing interest in students’ stories, that supports this relationship building. These relationships, in turn, support students’ sense of belonging.

Secondly, examining alternative lessons, they are designed to build upon student identities, interests, and real-world connections as perceived by the professor, based in part upon dialogue

with students emerging from real talks. While these connections strengthened interest and thus academic engagement, they also supported a sense of belonging, in which students saw that the resources of their lived observations and experiences augmented their learning. They found that there is a place for them within the material, rather than seeing it as something separate from themselves. Given that the PRT student survey responses on the topic of belonging were about 10 percentage points more positive than the whole-school climate survey responses, we posit that the combined pedagogical strategies of real talks and alternative lessons were effective in supporting student belonging, even if other factors may have been in play as well.

These findings address a gap in research on belonging on college campuses, in that the existing research has identified the importance of student relationships with faculty and their perception that teachers cared about them (National Research Council, 2004; Smerdon, 2002), but has not offered specific strategies to build and sustain these relationships. Other research on belonging examined the students' experiences on college campuses as a whole, without distinguishing contexts of academic or classroom experiences as separate from social contexts and college support services (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hoffman et. al., 2003). This study focused more narrowly on pedagogical strategies within the classroom as the context for examining students' experiences of belonging. The significance of identifying specific pedagogical strategies supporting students' sense of belonging, which can be used regardless of content area, is that educators wishing to develop more caring relationships with their students can implement specific practices, rather than hoping that the professor's inner sense or outward expression of caring will be felt as authentic by students.

Typically Underrepresented Students and the Pedagogy of Real Talk

Subsets of typically underrepresented students responded particularly positively to the pedagogy. Disaggregating the survey results, self-identified LGBTQ+ students reported that classroom faculty created a positive atmosphere, treated them with respect, had seen them as individuals, and cared about each individual as a person, all at a higher level than the results from the students as a group. Existing research on creating a safe campus climate for LGBTQ+ students recommends creating safe spaces (Ecker & Bassi, 2015; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019) and adding more representation in curriculum and marketing materials, as well as providing student support services tailored to their needs (Ellis, 2009). One of the classes included in the PRT survey was LGBTQ+ Issues and Literature, so students were exposed to representation in curriculum simultaneously to participating in the pedagogical practices of real talks and alternative lessons. However, given the broadly positive response of LGBTQ+ students outside of this course as well, this study suggests that in addition to curricular representation, the practices of real talks and alternative lessons strengthen perceptions of belonging in this group.

Similarly, students who self-reported as "students of colour" indicated that they felt a sense of belonging within PRT courses at levels at least as strong as the overall results. Given that students of colour have been shown to experience "belonging uncertainty," (Walton & Cohen, 2007) and that these students benefit from positive relationships with professors and the sense that they belonged in their classrooms (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Dayton, Gonzalez-Vasquez, Martinez & Plum, 2004; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005), these findings about the efficacy of PRT again offer specific pedagogical approaches that faculty can take to address the needs for belongingness in typically underrepresented students.

The significance of this finding is, again, in the specificity of pedagogical approaches that can contribute to the belongingness of students in typically underrepresented groups. While faculty

may hope or believe that students will sense their good will or caring intentions, these two strategies provide specific approaches that contribute to students from underrepresented groups experiencing belongingness through more positive relationships with their professors.

Limitations of the Study

Much of this data was collected during the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, the implementation of real talks and alternative lessons during this time required significant modification from the pedagogy's originally intended modality. Under previous circumstances, both of these practices would have been utilized in person. Instead, some were conducted virtually, and in at least one instance was pre-recorded. Additionally, the emotional and physical stressors resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic undoubtedly played a role in student engagement during the time the data were collected. An increase in face-to-face interaction would most likely shift results; we believe that in-person teaching will strengthen students' sense of belonging, but we have not yet collected and analyzed a set of completely in-person data.

Another limitation of the research is that the quantitative data set lacks a control group. This could be a set of survey results from classes in which PRT was not utilized, even classes taught by the same faculty in which they did not use PRT. While the researchers can glean some of this information from the university's climate surveys, the comparison is far from perfect, and future work could include a direct comparative analysis.

A second flaw in the university-wide climate survey results is that students of colour were combined into one group, rather than grouped more specifically by racial or ethnic identification. Thus, trying to align the PRT survey results with this university-wide survey, even though we collected more specific racial and ethnic self-reported identities of students, presented a challenge. As an imperfect solution, we combined these groups in the analysis. Again, creating a more direct comparative analysis would solve this problem.

A third consideration is that the faculty who implemented these practices were a self-selected group of professors who were motivated to apply to participate in the PRT cohort; to put aside time in the summers, over breaks, and a monthly meeting time; and to work on developing and implementing real talks and alternative lessons. This level of commitment shows that these faculty members were likely already attuned to developing relationships with their students and implementing creative pedagogical approaches, so a comparison between this self-selected group and the university as a whole is not a pure analysis of the PRT approaches.

A final limitation of this study is the short chronological range of the data, both qualitative and quantitative. A fuller picture of how students' sense of belonging is impacted by the implementation of PRT could be developed with more year-over-year data; for example, student responses might vary regularly from Fall to Spring semesters.

Significance of the Study

Despite these limitations, the triangulation between qualitative and quantitative data supports the overall analysis that delivering real talks, to invite shared experiences of human importance between faculty and students, and alternative lessons, to make clear the real-world relevance of the course content, work in conjunction to support a learning environment in which students feel a

sense of belonging. We claim that this sense of belonging motivates students to attend class more consistently, participate in class assignments and activities, and to trust their professors enough to communicate with them when they need additional support, either within the academic class or from other support networks at the university. As a side note, the benefit for faculty themselves participating in PRT as a collaborative group is significant. It has created and strengthened a cross-departmental community, which has enhanced a sense of belonging and collaborative support in the faculty work.

Implications of this research include both university-wide policies and individual faculty commitment to incorporate these two pedagogical strategies, real talks and alternative lessons, more consistently and purposefully into teaching practices. At the university level, the model of supporting cohort faculty groups of approximately 10 educators, agreeing to work collaboratively over three or more years to enact these two approaches each semester, has proven successful. In our case, the university has supported us by providing twice-yearly professional development sessions, a yearly stipend, and the ability to use this work for reappointment, tenure, promotion, and post-tenure review applications. At the individual faculty level, we would like to see the audience of this article experiment with including real talks and alternative lessons into their own teaching practices, across a wide variety of disciplines. While the case studies included in this article provide useful models, we also point readers to the book, *The Pedagogy of Real Talk: Engaging, Teaching, and Connecting with Students At-Promise* (Hernandez, 2022).

In addition to supporting all students, including students from typically underrepresented groups, developing classroom climates that support a sense of belonging is tied to student persistence and completion (Thomas, 2012), which in turn contributes to future economic stability and upward mobility of students (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2019; Carter & Welner, 2013).

Conclusion

The purpose and design of this study was to contribute to the existing conversation on student belonging by examining the impact of the pedagogy of real talk (PRT) on student sense of belonging, through a mixed methods approach. This exploratory investigation provides an initial understanding of how engaging with students through real talks and alternative lessons, building human connections as well as connections between academic material and students' interests and experiences, can increase a sense of belonging through deepening the professor-student relationship. Although additional study is required to understand its long-term impact, the implementation of PRT produces several notable outcomes. Students felt a greater connection to professors who actively created empathetic environments, and they indicated that classroom environments that fostered a sense of community and shared experiences supported their sense of belonging.

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Appendix A

Faculty Academy Student Survey

The following survey assesses your experience in our class. Please take a few moments to answer the following questions.

* Required

Survey Information and Research Disclosure

This survey is part of an ongoing research project that revolves around the implementation of the pedagogy of "Real Talk," which was developed by Dr. Paul Hernandez. (For more information on Dr. Hernandez's research or this pedagogy, visit his publisher, Corwin, at: <https://us.corwin.com/en-us/nam/the-pedagogy-of-real-talk/book276586>.) The research project is approved by the Fitchburg State University institutional review board (IRB) as "exempt" for human subjects research.

Confidentiality: This survey is anonymous. No personal identifiable information (PII) will be attached to your responses.

Use of Results: The aggregate results of this survey may be shared with the Fitchburg State University community and potentially at professional conferences or within published research. Individual responses may be selected to highlight certain themes in reports and publications, but as the survey is anonymous, no PII will be associated with individual responses.

Contacting the Researcher or the IRB: If you should have any questions about this survey, please contact the principle investigator on this project, Dr. Sean C. Goodlett, at sgoodlett@fitchburgstate.edu. You may also contact the Chairperson of the Fitchburg State University Institution Review Board at humansubjects@fitchburgstate.edu.

1. What course are you in? (Please use the following format: in a history survey course, e.g., "HIST 1100-08") *

The Classroom

2. Please respond to the following prompts on a five-point Likert scale. 1) Strongly Disagree; 2) Disagree; 3) Neither Agree Nor Disagree; 4) Agree; 5) Strongly Agree

Mark only one oval per row.

	1	2	3	4	5
The classroom had a positive atmosphere.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was treated with respect.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My peers were treated with respect.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was seen as an individual.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I was cared about as a person.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The learning environment was inclusive.*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The learning environment enabled me to express my ideas comfortably.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
All students were able to voice their ideas.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My attention was held during class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

* In an inclusive environment, people of all cultural backgrounds can: freely express who they are, their own opinions, and points of view; fully participate in teaching, learning, work, and social activities; feel safe from abuse, harassment, or unfair criticism.

3. Please respond to the following prompts on a five-point Likert scale. 1) Never; 2) Sometimes; 3) Often; 4) Very often; 5) Always

Mark only one oval per row.

	1	2	3	4	5
I asked questions or contributed to class discussions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I communicated with the instructor about assignments.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I looked forward to attending class.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I challenged myself to think with an open mind and to seek creative solutions to problems.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I remained open to feedback and constructive criticism.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I remained open to hearing and learning from diverse perspectives.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

My Learning and Learning Environment

4. Please respond to the following prompts on a five-point Likert scale. 1) Never; 2) Sometimes; 3) Often; 4) Very often; 5) Always

Mark only one oval per row.

	1	2	3	4	5
The course content was relevant and significant to me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The course content was connected to real-world examples.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This course inspired me to work to support my classmates and their learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel as if the material covered in this course is relevant to my future career.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
After taking this course, I am inclined to continue my education at Fitchburg State.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The material covered in this course is significant to my lifelong learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

5. Please respond to the following prompts on a five-point Likert scale. 1) Never; 2) Sometimes; 3) Often; 4) Very often; 5) Always

Mark only one oval per row.

	1	2	3	4	5
I felt strain on my mental health, stress, and/or isolation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I dealt with competing priorities due to work, family, and school.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My study environment was adequate and free of distractions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I missed interaction with classmates due to remote instruction.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I felt discomfort or a lack of familiarity with the required technologies and applications used in this course.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My access to reliable internet services was an obstacle.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My access to computer software and/or hardware was an obstacle.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My access to library resources was an obstacle.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My access to textbooks and course materials was an obstacle.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Demographic Information

6. Gender

Mark only one oval.

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Transgender or gender non-conforming Prefer
- ☐ not to answer
- ☐ Other: _____

7. Do you think of yourself as (please check all that apply): *Check all that apply.*

- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Gay
- ☐ Heterosexual or straight
- ☐ Lesbian
- ☐ Something else Unsure or
- ☐ questioning Prefer not to
- ☐ answer

8. Race/Ethnicity *Mark*

only one oval.

- ☐ Alaskan Native or American Indian
- ☐ Asian American
- ☐ Black or African American Hawaiian
- ☐ native or Pacific Islander White
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ _____

9. How old are you? *Mark*

only one oval.

- ☐ 18-24 years old 25-34
- ☐ years old 35-44 years
- ☐ old 45-54 years old 55+
- ☐ years old Prefer not to
- ☐ answer
- ☐

10. What year are you in? *Mark*

only one oval.

- ☐ First
- ☐ Second
- ☐ Third
- ☐ Fourth
- ☐ Fifth
- ☐ Other: _____

11. How many college-level courses did you take this term? *Mark only one*

oval.

- ☐ One
- ☐ Two
- ☐ Three
- ☐ Four
- ☐ Five
- ☐ Other: _____

