

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## Belonging and well-being of Brandon University students during Covid-19

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### Why this research is important

Restrictions implemented during the pandemic, such as the cancellation of in-person classes and the shift to online learning, challenged typical university social interactions and experiences. Students were at risk of social isolation and developing mental health problems ([Elmer et al., 2020](#)). Proactive post-secondary institutions must take steps to enhance and support student mental health and well-being.

### How the research was conducted

Twenty participants, all BU students from various faculties, were recruited through email and digital posters sent through the Dean of Students Office and course Moodle pages. Twenty participants, ages 18 to 37, were interviewed using an online platform for this qualitative study. The

### What you need to know

A sense of belonging, acceptance, and inclusion by a social group and having meaningful relationships with other students, staff, and faculty members support psychological and social adjustment and academic success in post-secondary institutions ([Gummadam et al., 2016](#); [Jorgenson et al., 2018](#); [Moeller et al., 2020](#)). A qualitative study, focusing on students' sense of belonging, was conducted while Brandon University (BU) classes were offered online. Findings were clustered into four themes: (1) student expectations of university; (2) shift to virtual learning; (3) impact of belonging on personal mental well-being, and (4) the role of faculty members. Participants and the literature provided recommendations to support and enhance belonging.

interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized by a research assistant. The transcripts were coded individually and as a team, with themes determined collectively.

### What the researchers found

- **Student expectations of the university experience** prior to the pandemic varied greatly among participants and impacted their sense of belonging. Nate (a pseudonym) shared that the university's focus was solely learning, "I wasn't

really focused on people; I was just focusing on University, focusing on me.” Grace, however, typified those students who viewed University as a place to build new connections, stating, “I expected to meet lots of people in classes, and I did.”

- **Moving to a virtual learning environment** was unplanned but necessary. However, relying on technology made forming connections difficult. Daniella reported, “I’m talking to black boxes. No one wants to turn their cameras on... I think the pandemic definitely made it harder ... there’s not that reaching out, there’s not that [sense of] ‘hey, I saw you in that class, so let’s maybe talk to each other and work through problems together’... There’s not that. Because no one wants to actually start that connection.”
- **Impact of belonging on personal mental well-being** was an issue identified by participants. Jade shared, “I was thinking of taking second semester off, just because I didn’t have that connection, so until then I felt very impacted mentally... I wanted to stop school at that point, ... my grades were just dropping, and it wasn’t good at all... not having that human connection.”
- **The role of faculty members** was key in making participants feel welcomed and that they belonged at BU. Some students reported a positive impact, whereas others reported feeling negatively impacted. Leanna noted, “[when faculty members] get to know their students ... that definitely makes you feel more welcome and part of a group.”

### How this research can be used

The following strategies can be implemented: regular emails demonstrating care from faculty and staff; using Moodle, Zoom breakout rooms, and group activities for

student-to-student interaction; video-recording lectures for asynchronous access; providing opportunities for social interaction before or after lectures; and faculty remaining online after class to give students an opportunity to connect. These strategies may also support students in a regular classroom setting.

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### Keywords

post-secondary, sense of belonging, COVID-19, mental well-being

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