Abstract
Using a cross-disciplinary, strengths-based model, this study strove to advance knowledge about college students who are from historically underserved populations and who attend one campus of a state university in the northwest region of the United States. Through an online survey of 235 students followed by semi-structured interviews with seven students, we investigated how students made sense of their college experience and whether they felt a sense of belonging. We also determined the individual, social ecological, and university resources and practices that contributed to their success.

Introduction
In many regions of the United States, dramatic demographic changes paired with continued inequity in academic achievement compel institutions of higher education to be more responsive to historically underserved students. These include students who are low-income, first-generation college students, and/or racial/ethnic minorities. Theory and research on college student retention, including the foundational work of Tinto (1993), provides guidance for the recruitment and retention of diverse college students. A key feature of Tinto’s model is the student’s institutional experience. To better understand how students succeed in college, research is needed about additional factors which may impact connection to college both as a place and as an experience. For instance, what external social ecological connections may enhance their feeling of belonging and what internal cognitive connections help them make sense of their experience?

Method
Survey Participants (N=235)
64% full-time students taking 12-18 credit hours
49% worked 20 or more hours a week
71% lived at home with family
66% top reason for coming to university was location

Interview Participants (N=7)
4 (57%) Female, 3 (43%) Male
6 (86%) First-generation college; 1 (14%) Second-generation college
6 (86%) Latino/a; 1 (14%) Native American Indian

Procedure
In the survey phase of the research project, we developed an online Student Involvement and Satisfaction Survey which gathered information regarding background information, experiences with advising, experiences with academics, satisfaction with campus life, and student involvement. In the interview phase of the research project, we conducted and audio taped face-to-face, semi-structured interviews.

Interview data analysis incorporated essential components of Consensual Qualitative Research (Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, & Ladany, 2005). Three judges were used to yield multiple perspectives and consensus was used to determine the meaning of the data. Data analysis involved reviewing transcripts, applying the interview questions as a “start list” and modifying as necessary to formalize domains. Together the team also constructed preliminary categories within domains and identified their frequency.

Results
Survey
Students appeared positive about their overall experiences at the university; 92% were likely or highly likely to recommend the university to others. In regard to questions related to integration outside of the classroom, 68% of participants indicated attending 0-3 campus activities per semester. Of those students with lower levels of interaction, 43% explained that their lack of participation in campus activities was due to work and 31% said their lack of participation in campus activities was due to family responsibilities.

Interviews
• What and/or who helped students to make sense of a four-year university?
  • Self-Management Skills (T)
  • Former high school classmates or friends who are now college students (V)
  • Other college students (V)
  • Student affairs staff (V)
  • Professors (V)
  • Ability to adjust to more diverse environment (V)

• To what extent do students feel a sense of belonging to the university community?
  • Engaged (V)
  • Somewhat engaged (V)
  • Minimally engaged (I)

• What and/or who has helped students be successful in college?
  • Family (T)
  • Self-motivation (T)
  • Professors (T)
  • High school educators (T)
  • Involvement in high school activities (T)
  • College access programs (V)
  • University resources (V)
  • Friends (V)

Domains, categories and frequencies. G=general (6-7 cases); T=typical (4-5 cases); V=variant (2-3 cases); I=infrequent (1 case).

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