



## **How College Unions Foster a Sense of Belonging among Students**

Research Note

## How College Unions Foster a Sense of Belonging among Students

College unions and student centers play a vital role on campus as a central hub for programs, services, and student life in general. College unions aim to not only provide critical services but also to supplement the classroom experience by allowing students to grow and learn as part of their broader college experience. A major component of these efforts is to help students achieve a sense of belonging in both the student union and at the institution more broadly.

This research note explores the concept of sense of belonging in relation to the college union. The findings are drawn from a national dataset constructed from the responses of over 14,000 college students to the ACUI/Benchworks College Union/Student Center Assessment during the 2018-2019 academic year.

### Key Points:

- More than four in ten students responded “Extremely” when asked to what degree their college union contributed to their sense of belonging at their institution.
- Students who participated in union activities, visited the union more frequently, and indicated the union contributed to their learning were more likely to indicate their union experience contributed to their sense of belonging to their institution.

### Key Questions:

1. To what degree did college unions contribute to student sense of belonging?
2. How did the degree to which college unions contribute to sense of belonging differ across populations?
3. How did the degree to which college unions contribute to sense of belonging differ based on union engagement?
4. How did the degree to which college unions contribute to sense of belonging relate to the overall college union experience?

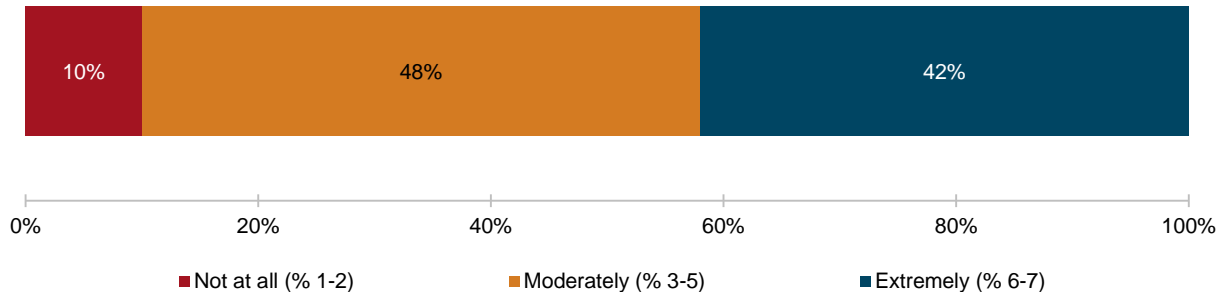
### To What Degree Did College Unions Contribute to Student Sense of Belonging?

Figure 1 displays the distribution of responses to the added sense of belonging question: “To what degree has your College Union experience positively contributed to your sense of belonging to this institution?” Overall, students indicated their union did contribute to their sense of belonging. Nine out of ten college union visitors reported that their experience at least moderately made a positive contribution to their sense of belonging to their institution, including four in ten that responded “Extremely” (6 or 7 on a 7-point scale) to this item. Just one in ten union visitors indicated their college union experience did not at all contribute to their sense of belonging.



## Figure 1: College Unions and Sense of Belonging

Distribution of responses to the survey question, “To what degree has your College Union experience positively contributed to your sense of belonging to this institution?”



### How Did the Degree to Which College Unions Contributed to Sense of Belonging Differ across Populations?

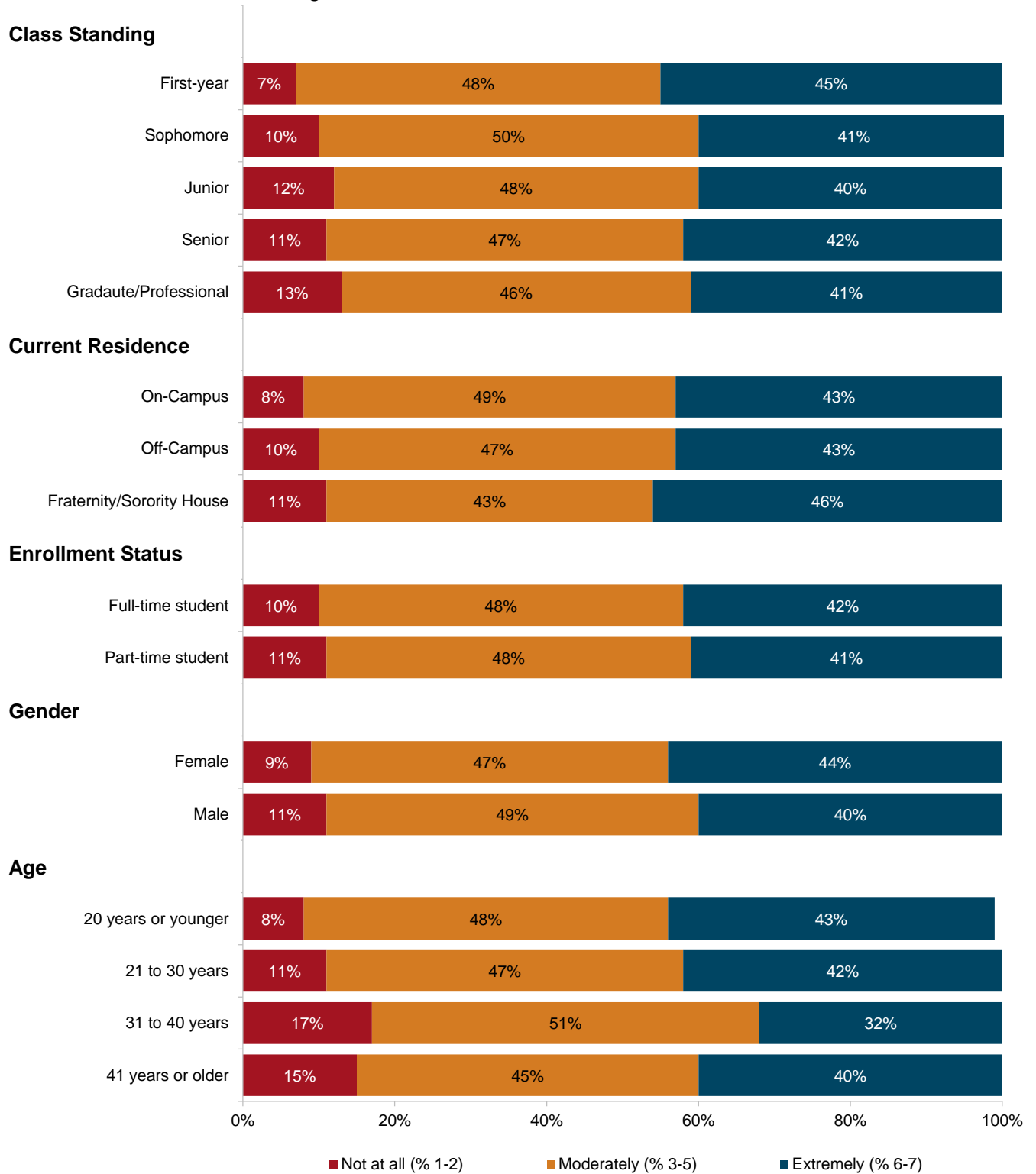
Figure 2 displays the breakdown of sense of belonging responses by various student populations. There were several differences across populations:

- **Class standing** – First-year students were more likely than other groups to report that their college union experience highly contributed to their sense of belonging (45%). While the percent of students for each class level who indicated their college union contributed to their belonging was steady around 40%, the percent reporting their experience did not at all contribute to their sense of belonging steadily increased as the students’ length of time in college increased.
- **Current residence** – On-campus and off-campus residents responded similarly to this question, with 43% of each group indicating their union experience extremely contributed to their belonging. Students living in fraternity or sorority houses were slightly more likely than both on and off-campus students to say their union experience contributed to their sense of belonging.
- **Gender** – Female students were slightly more likely to report their college union experience contributed to their sense of belonging than male students (44% vs 40%, respectively).
- **Age** – Students 20 years old or younger were the most likely to indicate their college union experience contributed to their institutional sense of belonging, while students between 31 and 40 years old were least likely to report their college union experience contributed to their sense of belonging.



## Figure 2: Sense of Belonging by Student Populations

Distribution of responses to the sense of belonging question across key demographic questions in the ACUI/Benchworks College Union/Student Center Assessment



## How Did the Degree to Which College Unions Contributed to Sense of Belonging Differ Based on Union Engagement?

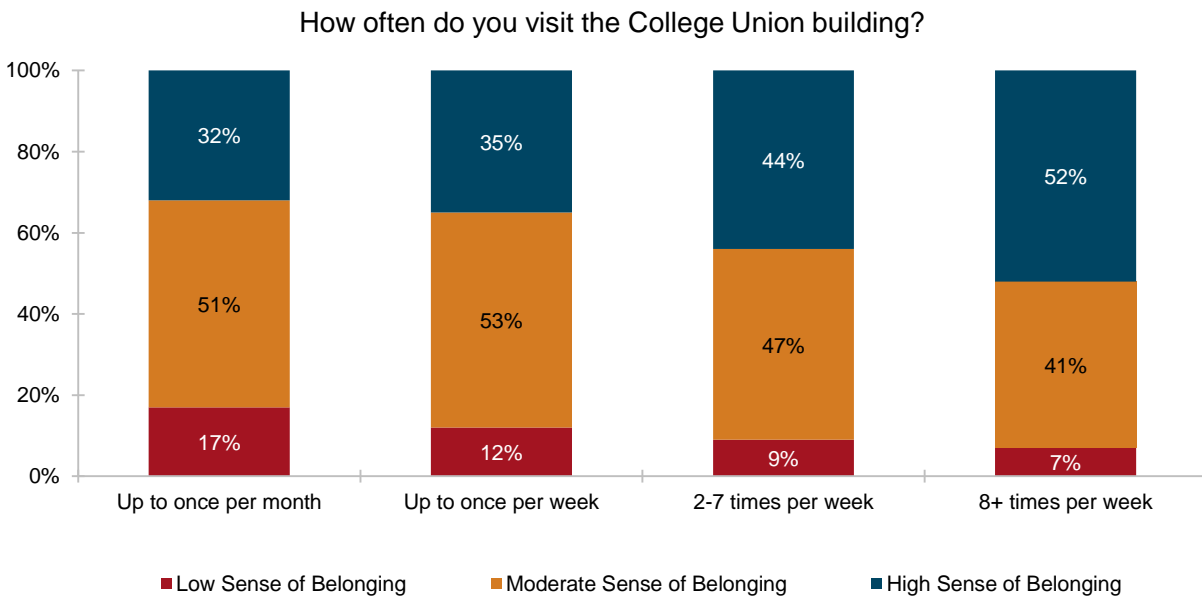
The ACUI/Benchworks College Union/Student Center Assessment contains several questions related to engagement with the college union, such as how frequently students visit the center and how often they participate in activities sponsored by the college union. Analysis of these items in combination with the sense of belonging item demonstrated that the college union's influence on sense of belonging varies by how engaged students are with their college union.

### Union Visits

Figure 3 displays the relationship between sense of belonging and frequency of visits to the college union. Students who visit the center more regularly were more likely to report that the college union experience contributed to their sense of belonging. The percent of visitors indicating the college union extremely contributed to their sense of belonging increased as the average number of visits increased.

#### Figure 3: Sense of Belonging by College Union Visits

Distribution of responses to the question, "To what degree has your College Union experience contributed to your sense of belonging to this institution?" by how often students visit the College Union



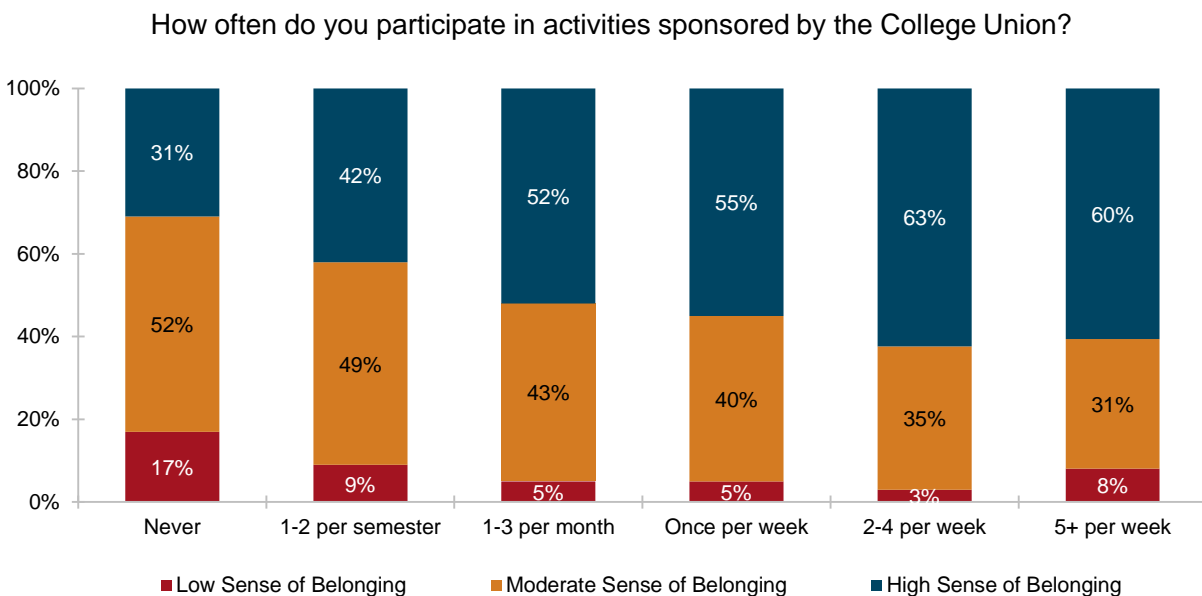
## Activities Attended

Figure 4 displays the relationship between sense of belonging and frequency of participation in college union activities. Students who reported participating in activities more frequently were more likely to respond that the college union experience highly contributed to their sense of belonging.

For example, while only 31% of students who do not participate in activities rated sense of belonging highly, 52% of students participating in at least one per month and 63% of students participating in 2-4 activities per week did so. However, the trend leveled off once students attended activities at least twice per week.

### Figure 4: Sense of Belonging by College Union Activity Participation

Distribution of responses to the question, “To what degree has your College Union experience contributed to your sense of belonging to this institution?” by how often students participate in College Union activities



### How Did the Degree to Which College Unions Contributed to Sense of Belonging Relate to the Overall College Union Experience?

The ACUI/Benchworks College Union/Student Center Assessment contains sets of questions asking the degree to which the students’ college union experience contributed to several learning outcomes, as well as questions about their overall union experience. Part of the analysis for this study learning related to and perceptions of the college union experience based on the degree to which the college union contributed to their sense of belonging.

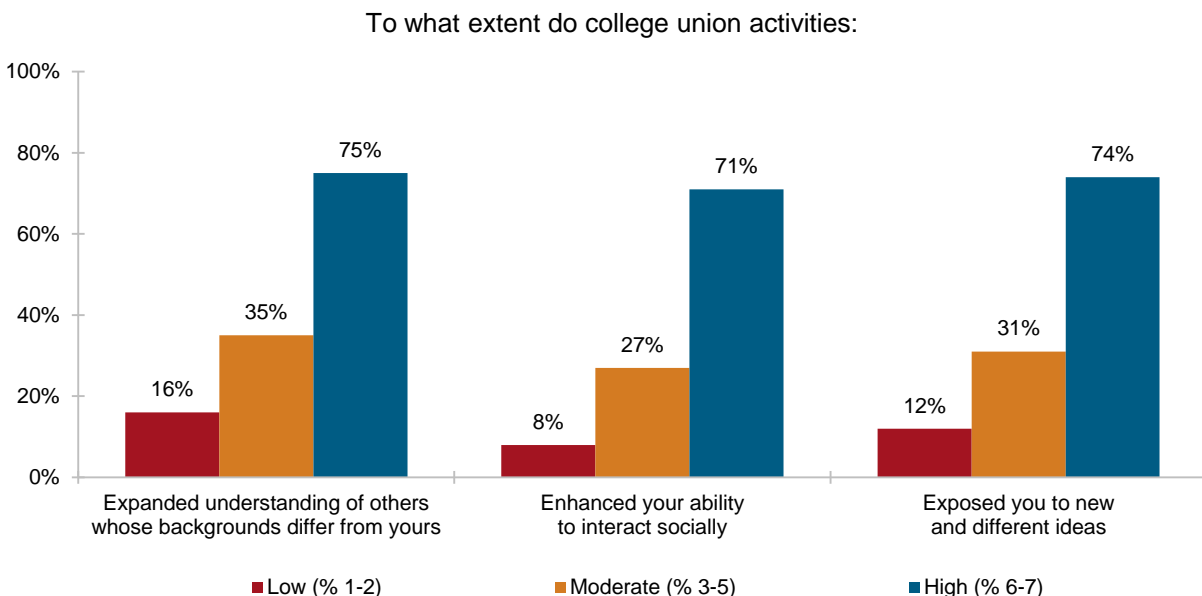


## Learning Outcomes

Figure 5 displays the percentage of college union visitors who scored high on the sense of belonging question based on the degree to which they indicated their college union experience contributed to other learning outcomes. Overall, students who scored high on other learning outcomes were more likely to report that their college union experience contributed to their sense of belonging. For instance, 75% of students who said their college union experience expanded their understanding of others whose backgrounds were different than you also scored high on the sense of belonging question. However, just 16% of those who indicated their union experience expanded their understanding of others whose backgrounds were different than you also scored high on the sense of belonging question.

### Figure 5: Learning Outcomes by Sense of Belonging

Percentage of students responding “Extremely” (% 6 or 7) on sense of belonging question by their score on learning outcomes



## Union Environment

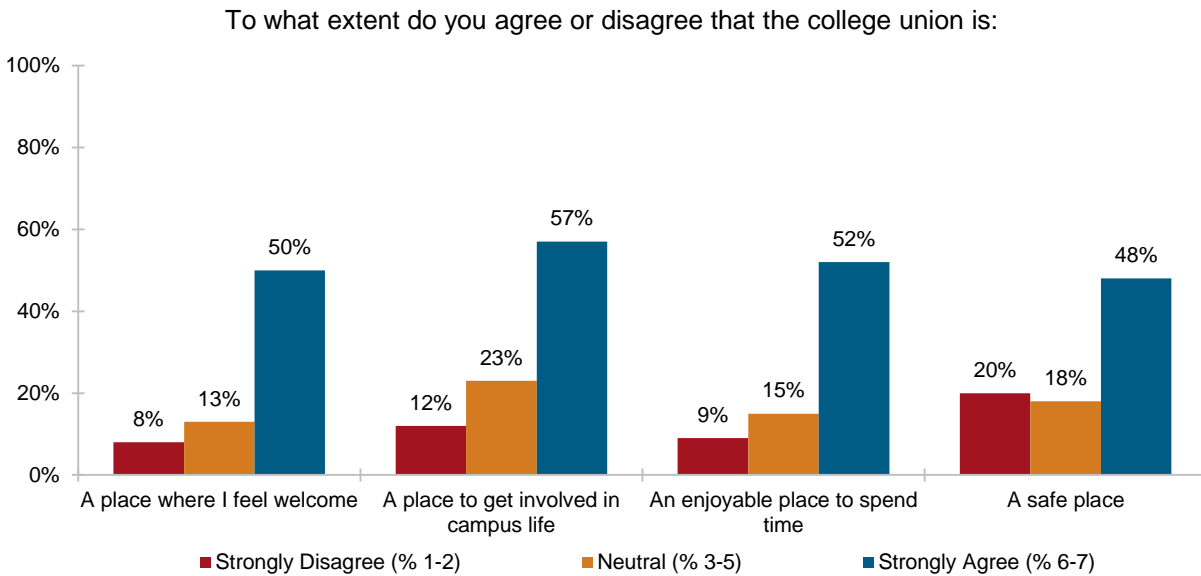
Figure 6 displays the percentage of college union visitors who scored high on the sense of belonging question on their scores to questions related to the college union environment. Generally, students who indicated that their union environment was positive were more likely to report their union experience contributed to their sense of belonging to their institution. For instance, 50% of students who strongly agreed that the college union was a place they feel welcome also scored high on the sense of belonging question. Conversely, 8% of those who strongly disagreed that the college union was a place they feel welcome also scored high on the sense of belonging question.





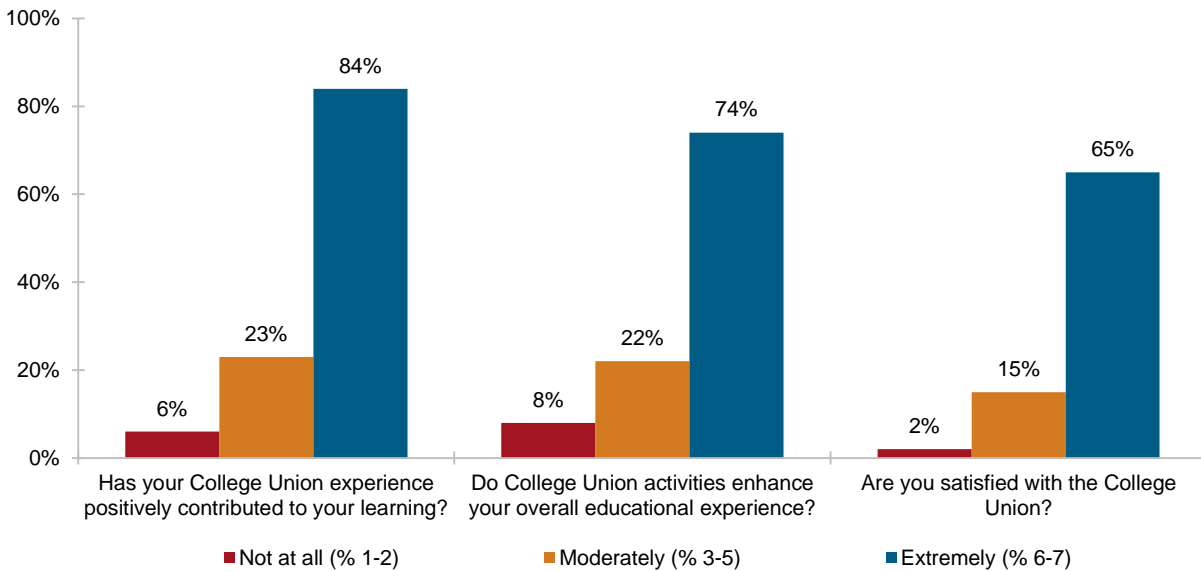
### Figure 6: Union Environment by Sense of Belonging

Percentage of students responding “Extremely” (% 6 or 7) on sense of belonging question by their score on questions related to college union environment



### Figure 7: Overall Program Effectiveness by Sense of Belonging

Percentage of students responding “Extremely” (% 6 or 7) on the sense of belonging question by their score on questions on their overall union experience





## Overall Union Experience

Figure 7 compares the percent of students who scored high on the sense of belonging question based on their responses to questions on their overall union experience. Students who reported a better overall college union experience were more likely to report their college union contributed to their sense of belonging to their institution. For example, 84% of students who reported that their college union experience contributed to their learning also scored high on the sense of belonging question. But, only 6% of those who said their union experience did not at all contribute to their learning also scored high on the sense of belonging question.

## Conclusion

Many higher education and student affairs professionals intuitively understand the importance of sense of belonging. However, pairing data with the powerful experiences and stories helps to better communicate the value of student activities participation to key audiences across and outside of our campuses. National data from the ACUI/Benchworks College Union/Student Center Assessment highlighted several key insights about how college unions contribute to students' sense of belonging to their broader institution:

- Most students at least somewhat agree that the college union experience contributes to their sense of belonging at their institution.
- There are differences in sense of belonging across campus populations that could have implications for efforts to engage students in the student center program.
- The frequency of visiting the college union and attending college union activities were positively related to the degree to which student said their union experience contributed to their sense of belonging.
- Sense of belonging was closely related to students' learning outcomes related to the college union, perception of the center environment, and overall perceptions of the college union.



## About the Data

The data used in this research note are 2018-2019 ACUI/Benchworks College Union/Student Center Assessment. The assessment was designed by the survey development team at Skyfactor in partnership to measure satisfaction and learning related to college unions. The assessment also allows for data collection related to non-visitors, including questions on why students choose to not visit the union. The data in this note are from 14,832 college students from 44 institutions in the United States.

## About Skyfactor

Since 1994, Skyfactor, a Macmillan Learning company, has been dedicated to improving retention, student success, and the quality of the college student experience. Our products and services have empowered over 1,500 college and universities to positively impact student development, learning, retention and satisfaction.

## About Benchworks

Benchworks (formerly EBI) includes over 50 easy-to-use nationally-benchmarked program assessments across a portfolio of over a dozen disciplines, including academic programs, housing and residence life, college union, student activities, orientation, new student transition, and student services. These market-leading assessments empower programs across an institution to identify areas of improvement for maximum impact on student outcomes. The national assessments are statistically validated, cover important content areas, mapped to key professional and accreditation standards, and allow for campus-level customization. Robust analytics and easy-to-understand reports deliver high-level trends, identify concepts statistically predictive of outcomes, allow for peer and longitudinal benchmarking, and support a culture of continuous program improvement.





For more information about Benchworks,  
email us at [info@skyfactor.com](mailto:info@skyfactor.com)  
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