

FINDING A HOME ON CAMPUS: SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG STUDENTS OF COLOR

MOTIVATION

The STEM workforce is ever-growing, but there is a lack of diversity regarding race, ethnicity, and gender representation. Addressing the lack of workforce diversity starts with educating underrepresented groups (URGs). Universities have developed support programs for URG students to increase enrollment and persistence. This study aims to understand how support groups affect the sense of belonging in education for URG students in STEM.

The study analyzes URG students' sense of belonging at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in the Golisano College of Computing and Information Sciences (GCCIS). The study mainly focuses on a newly created program, The Computing Organization for Multicultural Students (COMS). COMS mission is to build a supportive community that celebrates the talent of Underrepresented students in computing.

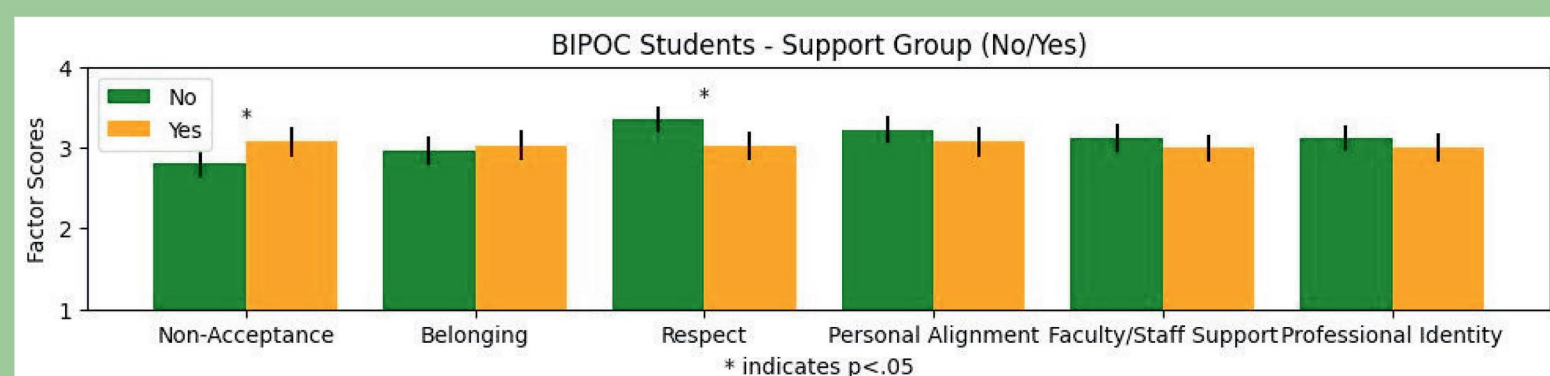
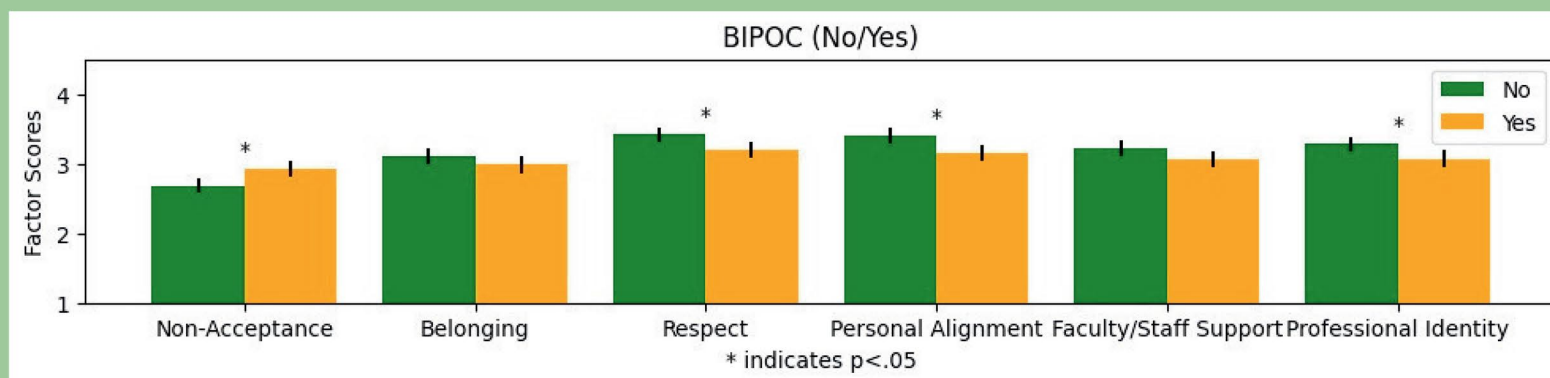
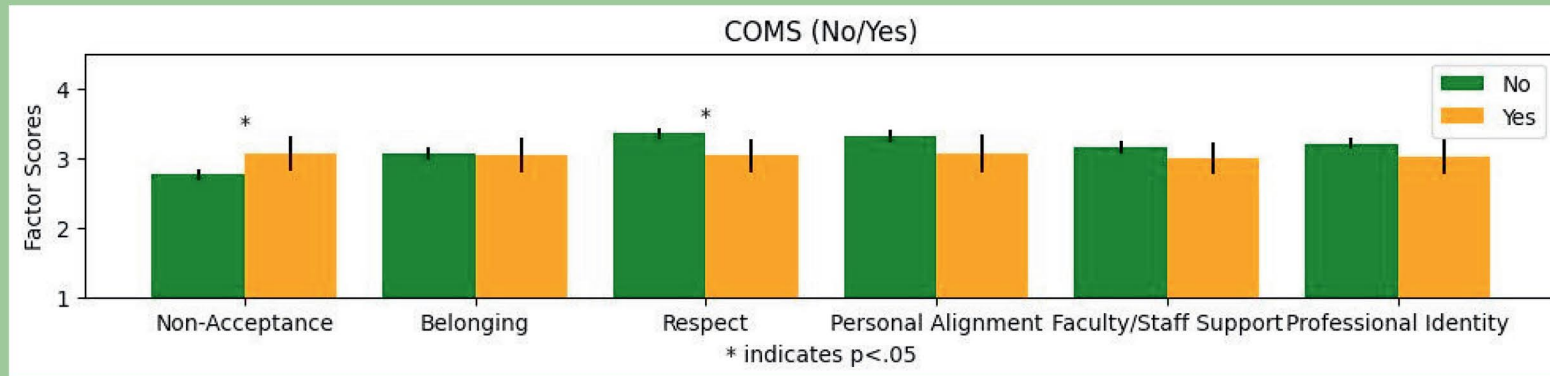
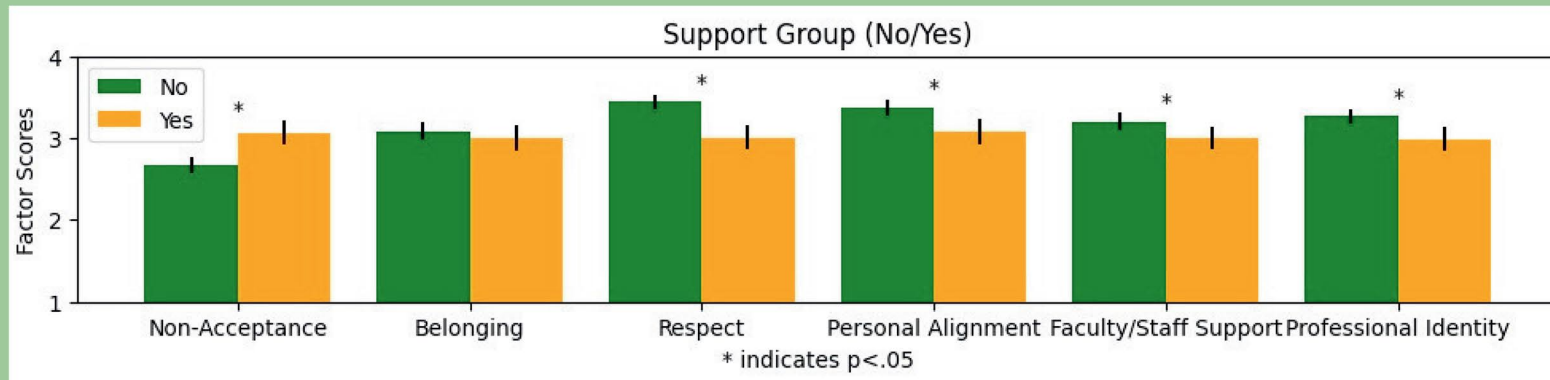
METHODS

- **Survey**
 - The study adapted the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) to computing and RIT. This a 19-point Likert scale questionnaire, narrowed down to 6 overarching topics using factor analysis.
 - Includes additional questions on support programs within diversity in GCCIS.
 - Distributed to the whole GCCIS undergraduate class.
- **Focus Groups with 15 COMS students**

SURVEY RESULTS

DATA

- 367 Participants ~ representing 7.5% of the undergraduate class.
- The sample is representative of the Black (7%) and Latinx/Hispanic (9%) population.
- Asian students are overrepresented and White students are unrepresented in the sample.



Support Group

- Students in support groups are less likely to feel accepted and respected, less likely to find personal alignment with RIT, less likely to experience support from staff and faculty, and lack professional identity within the field.

COMS

- 40 Participants.
- COMS VS. General population.
- Students in COMS are less likely to feel accepted and respected.
- Follow the trend of those who seek support groups in general.

BIPOC

- 167 Participants.
- BIPOC students feel significantly less accepted, respected, personal alignment, and professional identity.
- BIPOC within support group only show differences when it comes to professional identity and personal alignment.

Additional Observations

- Gender minorities, vs. the general population, show the same trend as those in support groups, as well as a lack of belonging.
- Gender minorities in support groups vs those that are not only score significantly lower on respect.
- COMS students scored the helpfulness of the program a 4.35 out of 5 on average.
- When asked "How COMS impacted their sense of belonging" multiple students talked about COMS being their main place to find connections. A few talked positively about how the group reached out before joining RIT.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

- Students seek places where they feel a sense of belonging in which people look like them. They want to not be in a space where they are the "only one."
 - This holds true for all students regardless of ethnicity or gender identity.
- Students feel like COMS has given them a place where they belong and find support from peers.
 - They feel it is hard to find this among peers in class.
 - They find it hard to identify with faculty due to a lack of representation.
 - They find this challenging in other spaces on campus designed for student support due to a lack of intersectionality.
 - "I am seen as black first and then a woman."
 - COMS doesn't feel "transactional" or an "obligation."
 - COMS is where they find friendships, support, and resources.
- Upperclass students are likelier to talk about belonging than 1st-year students.
- They are seeking more resource opportunities such as:
 - Peer lead workshops.
 - Travel to conferences.
 - Physical spaces.
 - Access to an alumni network specifically focused on navigating life after college.

CONCLUSION

- The survey results highlight the reasons students of color seek support groups.
- In line with RIT's climate survey; the personal sense of belonging of URG students, as measured by belonging, is higher than their perception of the sense of belonging of URG students in general, as measured by acceptance.
- The feeling of not being accepted, lack of respect, personal alignment, and lack of identification within the field are further supported by observations from the focus groups. It highlighted the need for students in these groups to want to feel heard.