

“Confidence to Continue”: A Qualitative Investigation of College Students’ Experiences of Microaffirmations

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Abstract

Colleges and universities are under increasing pressure to retain students and increase degree completion amid multiple social and economic threats to undergraduate student enrollment. A sense of belonging, motivation, and confidence are foundational to student success and essential components of strategic approaches to enrollment challenges. Microaffirmations, brief acts communicating care, listening, and support, can be a powerful tool within these efforts for promoting belonging. This study examined how 350 undergraduate students experienced microaffirmations and the meaning of the microaffirmations to their educational lives. Findings indicate that students identify multiple forms of microaffirmations and that these promote positive benefits, including perceived improvement in academic performance, persistence to remain in college, and assistance in navigating challenges. In short, microaffirmations provide students with the confidence to continue by influencing their perspectives on self-efficacy and support.

Keywords: higher education, student success, communication, microaffirmation, retention, student experience

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In recent years, undergraduate enrollment in higher education has declined across all institution types, including private nonprofits, 4-year public schools, and for-profit colleges (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022). At the same time, postsecondary schools remain under increasing pressure to retain their enrolled students and increase degree completion, especially among adult learners and Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and People of Color students (Complete College America, 2022). Enrolling and retaining students and bolstering degree completion among the increasingly diverse student populations accessing higher education today requires student engagement through inclusive learning environments where students feel seen, understood, and as though they belong (Thomas et al., 2021). Therefore, supporting students’ social and emotional needs and building their individual confidence to continue are imperative. Building on this perspective, this study employed a social emotional theoretical framework grounded in theories of belonging to appreciate the student experience.

Belonging is a psychological construct that Rogers (1951) first defined as an individual yearning to connect with other members of a group and experience positive regard. Belonging has been identified as a fundamental social and emotional human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1968). Among college students, those who feel belonging are more likely to engage in opportunities, utilize campus resources, and take steps to promote their own persistence and success (Strayhorn, 2018; Yeager et al., 2016). Within higher education, belonging has been described as a multidimensional experience consisting of four key factors: academic engagement, social engagement, surroundings, and personal space (Ahn & Davis, 2020). A sense of belonging positively influences academic motivation and enjoyment of learning, which in turn are likely to impact student achievement and retention (Pedler et al., 2022). As such, strategies for fostering belonging among undergraduate students should be a key component of institutional plans for enrollment and student success activities (Strayhorn, 2018).

A sense of belonging is linked to student confidence (Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Riley, 2019; Strayhorn et al., 2015). When students feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to feel at ease, to believe that attending college was the right choice, and to feel that they will be able to perform well there. Moreover, feeling connected and understood contributes to daily feelings of happiness and health (Lun et al., 2008). Conversely, social disconnection is detrimental to both mental and physical well-being (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). When students feel happy and healthy, they are more likely to have an overall positive collegiate experience. This does not mean that such students will not encounter challenges; however, those with a sense of belonging will be better equipped to negotiate and recover from setbacks. A sense of belonging has been identified as an important protective mechanism in the face of stress (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and is thus helpful to students navigating novel or challenging situations. A sense of belonging also aids students with developing meaningful relationships (Kuh

et al., 2005), which can help students persist through arduous times. Given how powerful a sense of belonging can be, it is particularly good news for colleges and universities that a sense of belonging can be developed through intentional strategies (Strayhorn, 2018). The intentional use of microaffirmations is one promising practice for faculty, staff, and administrators to consider as part of broader efforts to help students develop a sense of belonging.

To increase our understanding of microaffirmations within the college context and to explore how microaffirmations can be used as a tool to promote belonging and success, we surveyed students at a large public research institution about their educational experiences. Using qualitative content analysis, we analyzed the data to describe how students experience microaffirmations and the meaning students make of the microaffirmations. We find that microaffirmations help build students' confidence and motivate students to persist. From the analysis and discussion, we propose multiple tangible strategies for faculty, staff, and administrators to use microaffirmations in higher education.

Microaffirmations

Microaffirmations are brief communications encouraging belonging, care, listening, and support, especially for individuals who feel invisible or unwelcome in an environment (Rowe, 2008). Within the college context, microaffirmations can help students feel welcome, seen, and inclined to succeed (Powell et al., 2013). Microaffirmations can be verbal and nonverbal: Verbal microaffirmations may include greetings, compliments, and behaviors that validate and support others in a specific context where they may feel unsupported or invalidated; nonverbal microaffirmations can comprise environmental cues, such as opening doors, welcoming signage, and comfortable furniture. Faculty, staff, and administrators can intentionally structure environments, such as classrooms, residence halls, laboratories, and other physical spaces, to communicate microaffirmations by engaging in practices of active listening, recognizing and validating student experiences, and affirming emotional reactions, such as by acknowledging when a student is frustrated, disappointed, or even satisfied (Powell et al., 2013).

Although microaffirmations can and do have positive impacts when they are expressed as part of a general culture or posture of goodwill, it is important to delineate intentional acts of microaffirmation as a practical strategy to influence student success from general acts of kindness or polite behavior. Microaffirmations can be especially potent when the purveyor chooses to affirm a target in a specific area where they are experiencing marginalization or demoralization against a perceived or quantifiable majority experience. In such examples, microaffirmations can do more than provide general positive reinforcement; they can disrupt isolation and inequity (Ellis et al., 2019). For underrepresented students, microaffirmations by faculty can effectively communicate support for and promote academic adjustment among students in higher education

(Koch et al., 2022). For example, Ellis and colleagues (2019) found that microaffirmations in the form of personal support for and intentional acknowledgment of first-generation college students' belonging on campus positively influence these students' engagement with the campus community and resources. Scholars have also begun to study racial microaffirmations, including verbal remarks, behaviors, and environmental cues, specifically affirming and validating racial identities and racialized realities for their capacity to build hope and resistance against racism in educational environments (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021; Solorzano & Pérez Huber, 2020).

Other aspects of academic culture and identity, such as academic major or career fields, may influence how microaffirmations are experienced. Galdas (2017) found that microaffirmations support science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) students in building positive connections within their science communities and increase their intention to persist in STEM disciplines. Microaffirmations hold the potential to counteract daily negative messages students receive that communicate deficit, lack, and exclusion. In contrast to messages of insufficiency, microaffirmations affirm and recognize existing strengths and possibility and inspire feelings of hope, self-worth, and the capacity to thrive against perceptions of doubt. Individually, they can positively influence students' lives. When scaled as part of an institutional culture of practice, they hold the power to transform the campus climate.

Although research on microaffirmations in higher education has increased over the last decade (Eisenman et al., 2020; Ellis et al., 2019; Koch et al., 2022; Powell et al., 2013; Reveles, 2019; Rolón-Dow, 2019; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021), much is left to explore. Our study contributes to a deeper understanding of microaffirmations by cataloging the many ways in which undergraduate college students experience and assign significance to various acts of microaffirmation in their daily lives. Explorations of student perceptions through their own words led to data that produced rich descriptions of communications, behaviors, and actions. Our study provided a forum for students to give voice to their experiences and for their voices to be heard, attended to, and carefully considered. In this way, the study itself served as a microaffirmation.

As higher education professionals seek to mitigate the increasing number of students leaving higher education, it is critical that we not overlook the impact of students' social experiences on campus. The literature is fraught with notions about what is "wrong" with students and the college experience in general, while empirical investigation directly engaging students about what *is* working for them is rare. This study sought to challenge this standard and contribute to a more balanced understanding of practical approaches for student success.

Research Questions

The aim of this study was to explore experiences of microaffirmations among undergraduate students. We chose our research questions to guide our exploration of students' experiences

and perspectives. The research team reflected continually on these questions throughout the research process. Specifically, our study was guided by two research questions:

- (1) How do college students experience microaffirmations?
- (2) What meaning do students make of microaffirmations?

Methods

This qualitative study surveyed college students about their experiences and understandings of microaffirmations. Upon collecting rich data describing student experiences, student reflections, and observations, we employed systematic processes for rigorous textual analysis, leading to substantive insights for each of our research questions.

Participants

We distributed a survey to a randomized sample of 3,000 undergraduate students at a large, public research institution in the southeastern United States. The institution serves approximately 14,000 students at the undergraduate level and 3,500 at the graduate level. The survey was completed by 350 undergraduate students, yielding a response rate of over 11%. Participants provided consent prior to survey completion. No student names were collected throughout the study; however, participants did provide their email addresses to receive a \$10 gift card for completing the survey.

A total of 314 participants completed the demographic questions included in the survey. The sample was predominantly White (76.4%) and female (81.2%). A majority (55.4%) of students indicated that they had transferred to the institution, whereas 23.2% of participants were attending the institution via online-only programs. Although the sample is slightly overrepresentative of women and transfer students, participants largely reflect the demographic characteristics represented by students at the institution across the last several years. Table 1 summarizes participants' demographics.

Survey

The primary data source for this study was an anonymous, online, cross-sectional survey consisting of 35 questions that included four open-ended responses in which participants were asked to provide descriptions of environmental and supportive microaffirmations they had experienced and the meaning they made of those experiences. The survey took approximately 15 min to complete. Nearly 85% of survey respondents reported experiencing at least one microaffirmation as part of their collegiate experience (see Table 2).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

	<i>n</i>	%
Race/ethnicity		
Asian	13	4.1
Black or African American	15	4.8
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	0.6
Caucasian or White	240	76.4
Hispanic or Latinx	24	7.6
Mixed	15	4.8
Prefer not to answer	5	1.6
Gender		
Male	54	17.2
Female	255	81.2
Nonbinary	3	1.0
Prefer not to answer	2	0.6
Transfer		
No	141	44.9
Yes	173	55.1
Course modality		
All in-person	43	13.7
All online	73	23.2
Some in-person and some online	198	63.1

Table 2. Experiences of Microaffirmations Among Survey Respondents

	<i>f</i>	%
Experience		
Yes	295	84.29
No	55	15.71
Total	350	100.00

Content Analysis

Content analysis, which has been described as a useful technique for capturing meanings within data, particularly in cases of questionnaires, when little is known about the phenomenon under study with a particular group of people (Bismark et al., 2022), was the analytical approach we used for this study. Owing to the large volume of data, we used Text iQ (2023) software to assist in our analysis. This tool helped us organize, chunk, and

systematically code the data. It was also helpful for identifying key repetitions of words and phrases in the data set. Although this tool was a useful starting point in organizing the data, it is important to remember that in qualitative analysis, the researcher serves as the key tool for analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As such, in addition to using the software, the researchers continuously discussed the data with one another, looking for common understandings and digging into instances when understandings were not aligned. This approach led to the development of nine categories that described participants' experiences of microaffirmations (see Table 3) and nine categories that described the meaning participants assigned to those microaffirmations (see Table 4).

Table 3. Inductive Codes for Experiences of Microaffirmations

	<i>f</i>	%
Category		
Relationship	149	31.43
Communication	96	20.25
Motivation	80	16.88
Academic	47	9.92
Inclusion	35	7.38
Challenge	28	5.91
Wellness	25	5.27
Generosity	8	1.69
Future	6	1.27
Total	474	100.00

Table 4. Inductive Codes for Meaning of Microaffirmations

	<i>f</i>	%
Category		
Individualism	94	22.43
Care	90	21.48
Navigating challenge	49	11.69
Motivation to continue	47	11.22
Positive emotions	38	9.07
Sense of belonging	34	8.11
Optimism	27	6.44
Self-esteem	27	6.44
Purpose	13	3.12
Total	419	100.00

From these categories, we engaged in an iterative process of analysis and data reduction (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This included searching for patterns and relationships across categories and resulted in identification of eight overarching themes in the data. From analysis of data related to the first research question, four themes emerged describing how students experience microaffirmations. Four additional themes were derived from analysis related to the second research question and revealed the meanings students made of microaffirmations. Throughout the data analysis process, the research team met regularly to engage in a verification process that included a close inspection of codes, categories, and themes, and we continually asked questions to understand the roots of how students experience microaffirmations and the meanings students assign to microaffirmations. Team members kept individual memos and notes, which were shared in a common file so that all team members could access them repeatedly throughout the empirical investigation. Throughout the process, the research team reviewed and refined themes and systematically compared these to the raw data to ensure accuracy.

Findings

Study findings describe both (a) how students experienced microaffirmations and (b) what the microaffirmations meant to students. Within each area, multiple themes arose describing shared experiences and understandings of microaffirmations. These themes are supported by direct quotations from students. We use pseudonyms throughout.

How Students Experience Microaffirmations

To begin to describe how students experience microaffirmations, we summarize who and where microaffirmations came from, the form they took, the content of the affirmations, and the influence they had on students (see Figure 1). Microaffirmations came from people, including peers, strangers, and educators, as well as from the physical campus environment, including buildings, signs, and even landscaping. The content of microaffirmations included subjects ranging from motivational statements like “You’ve got this!” to expressions of belief in one’s future success, for example, communicating confidence that a student will excel in a future career. The collective impact of the microaffirmations studied can be characterized as generally positive and affirming to the student experience.

Microaffirmations Came From Key Individuals and the Campus Environment

Microaffirmations came from faculty, peers, academic advisers, and staff. They included communications in established relationships, such as between a student and

Figure 1. How Do Students Experience Microaffirmations?

From Faculty Peers Staff Campus environment	Content Motivational statements Acts of giving or generosity Belief in future success Recognition of effort Communication was unexpected Validation of feelings Validation of experience
Form Gestures and facial expressions Signs and posters Emails Discussion boards Assignment feedback Texts and phone calls Door holding Open office doors Public artwork Academic advising Class discussion Office hours Sidewalk chalking	Impact Improving academic performance Feeling welcome Feeling included Encouraged to continue Negotiating personal challenges Feeling seen as an individual Confidence in abilities Overcoming self-doubt Positive emotions Sense of belonging Feelings of closeness or togetherness

an academic adviser who had been working together over the course of a semester, and from individuals with which there was no prior relationship, such a staff member walking across campus or a server in a dining hall. One student described a microaffirmation as a “kind gesture” or a note of affirmation “from a friend or teacher.” Students reported affirmations from peers, such as when “another student texted me good luck before I took an exam that I was nervous for” and when a student working on campus as a resident adviser (RA) noted, “I worked as an RA and each year I had residents that would send me notes of appreciation.” Another student shared that “I have small conversations with dining hall workers that are helpful” when describing his experiences of microaffirmations on campus.

Microaffirmations from faculty were reported most frequently by students—pointing to the importance, power, and influence of faculty–student relationships. One student identified the way a physiology professor greeted students at the start of each class by referring to them “as physiologists, even though the majority of us never had a background in the course” as a form of microaffirmation. The student shared that this greeting “made me feel like I was capable of finishing the course.” The professor’s comment implied a belief in the students’ abilities and validated their experiences engaging

with the course material. Calling students “physiologists” conveyed respect for and validation of the students’ learning and their belonging in a professional field.

Microaffirmations were also important for delivering instructive feedback:

My film studies professor . . . always took the time to comment on my assignments letting me know of any criticisms or compliments he had for me. Whether or not I did an amazing job on my work he would frequently let me and other students know that he appreciated our participation and focus in the class.

Compliments from faculty were often coupled with additional feedback appreciating students’ effort and time on task, as well as offering specific ways in which a student could improve their work. For example, one student explained,

My honors adviser is always encouraging me and ensures to point out my successes even when critiquing my work. For example, I was having a hard time being clear and concise when writing my honors thesis, and my adviser was always pointing that out. However, she would [put] smiley faces and great work on sections that were well written.

The time the faculty member took to quickly acknowledge positive work helped the student receive feedback on areas in need of improvement.

Students also mentioned microaffirmations as coming from the campus environment. Students noted that the cleanliness of the campus grounds communicated that the environment, and the individuals in it, are valued. Chalk drawings and messages written on campus pathways were identified as forms of microaffirmation—they sent quick messages of kindness and invited students to join activities. The presence of public art, welcoming landscaping, and natural spaces with trees was also noted. Places to sit comfortably both inside and outside also sent a message to students that they were welcome to be and spend time in the area. The presence of furniture for studying, socializing, and resting communicated to students that they were welcome and appreciated. The campus spaces were designed with students in mind, and this validated students’ experiences and need for study, socialization, and rest.

Microaffirmations Came in Multiple Forms

Microaffirmations were expressed through multiple forms of communication, including verbal and nonverbal communications, physical signs, artwork, sidewalk chalking, electronic communication (emails, texts, and discussion board posts), written feedback on assignments, and course activities. A student gave an example of a head nod he interpreted as a nonverbal microaffirmation: “Every time a professor nods to me in the hallway or tells me to keep in touch I feel like I accomplished what I wanted to here and put in the work.” Other students noted “using friendly facial expressions and gestures” and being “greeted by a smile and kind words” as forms of microaffirmations.

Microaffirmations were also expressed through class meetings, office hours, academic advising, and feedback on assignments, in addition to nonacademic spaces, including the campus recreation center: “At the University gym, on the way out they give out free fruit. It sounds small and strange, but the lady always greets me with a smile, and it is a great part of my day.”

Environmental signals of microaffirmation ranged from sticky notes left in study rooms—“Someone leaving a note on a white board in a study room saying, ‘I hope you’re having a great day’”—to public art valuing diversity and inclusion, such as a Black Lives Matter monument at the center of campus. As mentioned previously, many students also noted sidewalk chalking, used to advertise campus events and activities, as a means through which students communicate welcoming and belonging. According to students, microaffirmations were also communicated in other nonverbal, asynchronous ways, such as written emails and phone calls, texts, and discussion board posts. Regarding discussion board posts, for example, one student expressed, “I have had many supportive comments from other students,” and another shared, “I almost always received microaffirmations from classmates during weekly discussion boards.” A student described the importance of faculty–student affirmations in the context of online instruction:

Teachers have said positive things to me in an email and that has made me feel good, and that I’m doing well. It is motivating to continue on my school journey. Being that I am an online student this is very important because it’s the only source of affirmation online students get.

Another student who engages primarily in online studies described the impact of a virtual microaffirmation: “This small act made me feel connected to my school community although we’re hundreds of miles apart geographically.”

The Content of Microaffirmations Was Motivational, Inclusive, Generous, and Future Oriented

The information conveyed in the microaffirmations included motivational statements, as described by a student who wrote, “I’ve gotten many notes that just say, ‘you can do it’ or encouraging words that definitely go a long way.” The student also noted the content as promoting inclusion and a sense of belonging. The student described that professors convey microaffirmations “when they use inclusive language, including the acknowledgment of different gender identities and sexualities; when they speak positively of women in the field; when they take the time to learn our names or say, ‘Good to see you again.’” Microaffirmations also included acts of generosity, such as giving help or assistance and providing food, flexibility, and support during challenging times. These acts of generosity ranged from a student giving a peer “lunch for free when I was hungry” to door holding: “It’s a small thing but every time I’m near a door and there’s a person in front of me, they would hold the door for me. I’ve learned to do the same in such a situation.” Students also noted statements about students’ future

success as microaffirmations. One student shared, “My neuroscience lab instructor told me that he is optimistic about my future career in the medical field. Another instructor said that I will do well in my career because of my caring nature.” Students commented that these statements show “that they [faculty] care and are invested in your future.” A student described one such meaningful interaction with their professor:

I was meeting with a professor, and we were going over my proposal for a study topic. After giving feedback, the professor told me that the study I came up with was important and interesting, and he was excited to see where I would go with it.

They were also forms of “recognizing the achievements of others” and demonstrating genuine interest in another person. One student, for example, stated that microaffirmations include simply “asking others for their opinions.”

Microaffirmations Influenced Perceived Academic Performance, Persistence, and Navigation of Challenges

Students reported that they believe microaffirmations positively influence their academic performance on assignments and tests. As an example, a student commented, “I was feeling worried about an assignment and the professor encouraged me to relax and that I was capable of doing it,” while another student indicated that the microaffirmation encouraged slowing down and reflecting: “This [microaffirmation] was meaningful to me because sometimes I feel as if I am rushing through an assignment to just get it done and turned in.” Microaffirmations were also noted as encouraging students to continue with their degree programs and advance toward their academic goals. “It helped me in my education to keep going,” offered one student. Another student wrote that the benefit of a microaffirmation is that “it keeps you motivated.” This was especially true for a student who was new to an academic discipline: “It was a subject area I was unsure of being successful and this encouragement made me feel so much confidence and pride in my work and continuing on!” Most clearly put, one student, Moriah, wrote, “It gave me confidence to continue.”

Students shared that microaffirmations helped them to negotiate personal challenges, from recovering from hurricane damage to their home to pregnancy, working full-time, and caregiving while in school. A student shared the following story:

My family experienced terrible flood damage to our home after the Hurricane Fred rains last August. I asked for an extension on a project so that I could get all of the FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] application materials and documentation submitted within the timeframe. My instructor not only granted me an extension but sent a brief message of encouragement and support. It was very much appreciated in such a volatile time!

Microaffirmations communicated to students the belief that they could negotiate the challenges they were experiencing. A student who was struggling during the semester shared,

I was going through a really tough time when this [experience of microaffirmation] occurred. Having a professor who I only saw twice a week notice I wasn't doing so great made me feel like she actually paid attention to her students and cared about them outside of class.

One adult learner in the study shared that experiencing the microaffirmation “kept me motivated to keep taking classes and get my degree, even though I work full-time, have children, bills to pay . . . etc.” Another student reported that the experience was important “because going back to school and working full-time can be a little scary so encouragement is helpful to keep going.”

What Microaffirmations Mean to Students

Students articulated positive meaning assigned to the microaffirmations they identified within their collegiate experiences. As one student shared, “It [receiving a microaffirmation] made me feel like I was contributing. Small acts can build up into larger ones. Sometimes the small stuff matters more.” Collectively, students described microaffirmations as validating student experiences and identities, increasing confidence, and communicating care. Moreover, students shared that microaffirmations frequently were unexpected and surprising.

Microaffirmations Validate Student Experiences and Identities

Serving to recognize effort and arduous work, students noted that microaffirmations made “me feel good about the work I have been doing” and “like I am doing a good job. Like I am successfully making progress at what I am doing.” Many students expressed that the microaffirmations helped them feel seen and valued as individuals. For example, a Hispanic female student, Carmen, wrote, “It affirms to me that I am ‘seen’ and for me it’s an act that I’ve not seen in a while.” Other students shared, “I wasn’t just another face to him [professor]”; “it made me feel less like a roster number, and more like an individual student to a professor with many students”; and “it’s nice to feel seen on campus and to know that other people recognize where I was working so hard.” Jessica discussed how it is “easy to get lost in the crowd, especially in some of the courses with a larger class size or one that is asynchronous online,” and that microaffirmations were “acts [that] made me feel seen and valued.” Microaffirmations advanced inclusion, communicated welcoming, and helped with feeling a sense of belonging. For example, Eva shared, “This small act made me feel connected to my school community,” while another student, Grace, reported that the experience of a microaffirmation “made me feel welcomed.” Microaffirmations were also reported as beneficial to students, such as

Lauren, who were feeling lonely: “It made me feel supported and less alone.” A student named Jessica shared that a microaffirmation was important to her “because it made me feel included.”

Microaffirmations Increase Student Confidence

Students attributed increased confidence to their experiences of microaffirmations. The small moments of affirmation helped Danielle, a social work major, “feel more confident in my academic abilities and my ideas.” Another student, Emerson, shared that when taking a new course, “it was a subject area I was unsure of being successful and this encouragement made me feel so much confidence and pride in my work and continuing on!” Increasing confidence applied to academic abilities and persisting in college. As previously noted, Moriah expressed that a microaffirmation “gave me confidence to continue.” Other students shared that microaffirmations motivated them to continue in their degree programs and to invest effort in their educational pursuits. Jordan, a transfer student, expressed, “It made me want to work hard and do well in class.” Microaffirmations also contributed to the development of pride in one’s work, as Sophia, a nursing major, shared: “The acts encouraged me to continue in my classes and gave me a sense of pride.” Jeanine described how an affirmation reaffirmed her commitment to pursuing her goals: “It gives me encouragement to continue working for my goal and know that I am a capable student to achieve this goal.”

Carlos, a transfer student, commented that the power of microaffirmations is that they “can change how people feel about themselves.” Microaffirmations helped students feel as though they made good decisions and were where they belonged, as Henry, a history major, shared: “It helped me confirm that I am now on the right path. . . . It made me feel more confident in myself and my abilities when I was experiencing feelings of anxiety and impostor syndrome.” For many students, microaffirmations helped them overcome self-doubt, inspired feelings of high value and worth, and aided them in viewing their contributions as meaningful. Virginia, a first-generation college student and a nursing major, reported, “It gives me reinforcement that what I am doing is meaningful and [I] should continue on in this course. It helps me center my purpose which is to finish my BSN [Bachelor of Science in Nursing] degree.” This comment was like many other statements in which students shared that experiencing a microaffirmation validated their choice of degree program and career.

Care Is Communicated Through Microaffirmations

Microaffirmations communicated comfort and care and even inspired students to care for other people. For example, a biology student, Kelly, said that experiencing a microaffirmation “reminded me that people do care about me, and I should do the same.” The communications resulted in students experiencing positive emotions, as evidenced through statements like “it brightened my day” and “makes me feel good!” Several students noted how nice it is to “know that someone is thinking of me.” Of a

faculty member, Savannah expressed, “It felt so nice knowing someone was thinking of me, practically a stranger at that. She took time out of her day to make sure my day was bright and that was very kind”; another student, Anya, shared that her “professor reached out to me one on one which made me feel taken care of and paid attention to.”

Microaffirmations Are Often Unexpected

Students frequently described microaffirmations as unexpected or surprising communications. For example, Suchi, a first-generation college student, reported, “It was an unexpected compliment that boosted my confidence in my academic abilities.” For many, the microaffirmation was seen as someone going beyond what was expected or required, as evidenced by student comments that “most teachers don’t do this” and “most people do not show these acts of kindness.” That the communication was not required or essential to achieving a task made its impact especially powerful, as it was perceived to require additional effort and intentionality. Yang said of his professor, “It meant a lot to me because they did not have to do that for me,” and Madison shared, “Most people would turn the other cheek and not worry about someone else’s life.” Finally, Madison reported, “This small act was meaningful to me because it reminded me that someone did care about me and there is good in the world.”

Negative Cases

Although 84.29% of survey respondents indicated that they experienced a microaffirmation, 15.71% indicated that they had not experienced a microaffirmation. It is thus important to note that microaffirmations were not universally experienced by the students in this study. Among those who reported experiencing a microaffirmation, some were unable to articulate why the experience was meaningful. For example, Wei said she was “not sure,” and Robert responded, “I don’t know what exactly this is asking,” highlighting the potential distance students may feel from the concept of microaffirmations or the language used to describe them. We noted as outliers observations in the data set that seemed inconsistent with most of the data (Osborne & Overbay, 2004). For example, a student identified a sign as a microaffirmation, but when asked why the sign was meaningful, the student indicated that it was “not really” meaningful and “just a poster.” Ariana described a microaffirmation as “not necessarily meaningful to me but it gives me a good feeling that I am in a good community.” Overall, outliers were infrequent in the data set. Nonetheless, we carefully examined them alongside the evidence for themes to ensure that we did not overlook or dismiss student insights. Having some examples of outlying or negative/deviant cases that do not fit with the central interpretation is common in a qualitative investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Discussion

While higher education offers students many opportunities for social, intellectual, and professional growth, students also experience notable change and challenges within the college context that can impact how they navigate and subsequently benefit from the opportunities provided (Patton et al., 2016). Students' sense of support, aptitude for success, and perception of care on campus can influence persistence, engagement, and overall thriving in college (Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013). Interactions with peers, staff, and faculty inform student development, including students' perceptions of themselves, their relationships with college, and their learning and growth trajectories. Optimal development and learning occur when students, faculty, and staff engage in high-quality interactions, which are defined as experiences in which students feel valued and their potential for success is encouraged (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004). Self-efficacy—defined as one's sense of confidence or belief in oneself to act in ways that produce specific outcomes—is also highly correlated with academic success (Bandura, 1997; Chemers et al., 2001; Multon et al., 1991). High-quality interactions help students develop motivation and self-confidence to engage in behaviors and use resources to fulfill their educational aspirations (McClellan, 2007; Shockley-Zalabak, 2012). Furthermore, students who experience high-quality interactions are more likely to persist through the challenges and opportunities of college than students who have low-quality interactions (Kuh et al., 2005). Study findings indicate that microaffirmations can aid in the experience of high-quality interactions and, though brief in nature, can have lasting influence. As one student, Olivia, shared, “even the littlest words of affirmation go a long way.” With this in mind, we offer multiple applications to practice for university communities to employ in their efforts to advance student success.

Recommendations

Our study finds that microaffirmations help build students' confidence and motivate students to persist. As expressed in their own words, most students found benefit in receiving a microaffirmation and attached positive meaning to the experience, including citing ways the experience influenced their behaviors and perspectives on their college journeys. To increase the frequency and aid in the development of microaffirmations, we identify multiple applications for implementation by faculty, staff, and administrators in Table 5. Applications to practice from our data analysis and discussion are recommended across three domains: campus environment, teaching, and training and development.

Campus Environment

The campus environment includes physical spaces and structures where students noted microaffirmations. In the data, the library was mentioned more than any other building or physical space on campus as a place where students felt welcomed and

Table 5. Recommendations for Practice

Domain	Activity
Campus environment	<p data-bbox="458 256 1147 324">Appreciate the library as a place for students to feel welcome and seen on campus.</p> <p data-bbox="458 340 1126 372">Use sidewalk chalking to communicate microaffirmations.</p> <p data-bbox="458 388 1083 455">Consider public art installations to convey inclusion to students.</p> <p data-bbox="458 471 1180 539">Encourage faculty, staff, and administrators to keep their doors open when possible.</p> <p data-bbox="458 554 1079 587">Install comfortable, casual furniture in student spaces.</p>
Teaching	<p data-bbox="458 604 1173 672">Employ online discussion boards as a forum for peer–peer and faculty–student microaffirmations.</p> <p data-bbox="458 687 1170 720">Incorporate microaffirmations into critical academic feedback.</p> <p data-bbox="458 736 1147 803">Employ a practice of check-ins with students to demonstrate awareness of individual circumstances.</p>
Training and development	<p data-bbox="458 817 1094 884">Train faculty, staff, and student leaders on the power of microaffirmations and how to give microaffirmations.</p>

appreciated and had their needs affirmed. The library was identified as a place where students could go any time of day. The comfortable furniture, signage, and welcoming staff communicated to students that the library is a place where students belong and are valued. From this finding, we encourage campuses to appreciate that the library can be an important venue for communicating microaffirmations. We advise speaking with library staff about microaffirmations and considering ways to increase student use of the library by promoting it as a safe space for community, study, and contemplation and as a refuge during eventful days on campus learning, working, meeting, and completing the administrative tasks typical in the daily lives of busy college students.

Within the domain of the campus community, we recommend using sidewalk chalking to communicate microaffirmations. We were surprised by how frequently this was cited in the data. On our campus, student groups and organizations frequently chalk messages to students on pathways throughout campus. Based on the evidence in the data regarding chalking, we propose that there is likely great value in encouraging student leaders and organizations on your campus to chalk affirming, invitational, and welcoming messages to students on campus sidewalks, especially by classroom and residential buildings. Finally, from the campus environment domain, we recommend public art installations that convey inclusion to students. For example, students in our study noted the importance of a Black Lives Matter sculpture in the center of campus and other art displays, such as one including photographs of diverse community members. When considering new, public art on campus, we recommend considering art that sends a clear message of inclusion to students.

Within the domain of the campus environment, open doors and comfortable furniture are additional recommendations. We encourage faculty, staff, and administrators to keep office and department doors open as much as possible. During the pandemic, as many moved to remote work, offices were shuttered. As people have returned to campus, doors may be propped open less frequently than before. To remediate this change, we advise scanning your campus buildings to see where doors are open and where they are not. In our study, open doors sent a clear message to students that they are welcome, even if they did not access the person or service behind the open door. Simply seeing an open door was a visual cue that students are welcome in the environment. Finally, we recommend using comfortable, casual furniture in student spaces. If a student feels like they might break a chair if they put their heavy backpack on it or ruin a table if they spill soda or coffee on it, they are less likely to be at ease in the environment. We recommend sturdy, comfortable, and stain-resistant furniture. Before buying furniture, we recommend having students test and give feedback on options.

Teaching

Within the domain of teaching, three key applications to practice emerged from our work. First, we highly recommend the use of online discussion boards as a forum for peer–peer and faculty–student microaffirmations. In higher education, students are active collaborators, along with faculty and staff, in their learning (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). This was especially apparent in the descriptions we received about conversations on course discussion boards. Many students indicated that online discussion boards were places where their thoughts, ideas, and questions on course content were seen, validated, and further developed. This was true for fully online, hybrid, and in-person courses using a learning management system. We urge instructors to use online discussion boards often, to monitor discussions closely, and to teach students how to use the discussion boards for both productive discussion and positive affirmation.

Another teaching application centers on incorporating microaffirmations into critical academic feedback. Students reported that when a microaffirmation was coupled with critical feedback, it helped them receive the critical feedback. We recommend this approach, for example, acknowledging the effort a student put into the work while also suggesting an improvement or addition to the work. Using this strategy could improve not only student work but faculty–student relationships. Part of belonging is wanting to be understood by others; when individuals feel understood, their relationships are positively influenced, whereas when individuals feel misunderstood, their relationships are negatively influenced (Reis et al., 2017). Saying to a student “I understand and see the effort you put into this” will help the student feel understood. Also, giving specific feedback to help an idea grow shows care and understanding. We recommend, for example, instead of writing on a paper “this section is vague,” using more affirming and detailed feedback, such as “The idea you present here is compelling; however, the supporting evidence needs to be strengthened. Can you bring in more specific details

from our readings?” This may help the student appreciate the feedback and build a stronger relationship between the faculty member and the student.

In this same vein of wanting to be understood by others, our third recommendation, check-ins with students, can help students feel seen and supported. This may be especially true and valuable after a difficult experience. One respondent to our survey, Emily, offered, “A professor reached out after a meeting to ask if I was okay because I seemed nervous. She gave me encouragement.” Jake, an exercise science major, shared,

I had a professor that was truly invested in my life. They really cared how I was doing emotionally, physically, and academically last semester when I was going through so much. Their constant reaching out to me and just doing small check-ins with me is what I would consider the microaffirmation.

Nora reported,

I had a wonderful professor in the Education program that noticed I wasn't acting completely like myself that day. She asked to talk to me after class and asked me how I was doing and wanted to make sure everything was okay. This is the most any professor has ever done for me at this campus, and it meant the world to me.

These examples emphasize the capacity and optimal positioning for faculty to both see and connect with students during pivotal moments in their educational experiences. To see and connect with others effectively requires a practice of sustained raised awareness, increased emotional intelligence and sensitivity, and a decided posture of initiative to share compassionate observation of someone's behavior, ask thoughtful questions, and then offer support.

Training and Development

Our final suggested domain, training faculty, staff, and student leaders on the power of microaffirmations and how to give microaffirmations, can help exercise these practices.

Within the various everyday exchanges that students have with others on campus, a microaffirmation has the potential to transform a transactional interaction into a developmental one. For example, an adviser could simply complete a transactional interaction, such as signing off on a course schedule requiring approval, or alternatively, the adviser could employ a microaffirmation, such as saying, “I see you have chosen some interesting and challenging courses this semester. Can you tell me about your selections?” This statement sees and validates the student's choices and opens the door for a conversation about the student's interests and motivations. As another example, consider a student who might be talking with the registrar or financial aid office about a thorny administrative issue. While attending to the student's needs, the staff member could be advised to take a moment to say to the student, “I can see how frustrating this is” or “Contacting us is a good first step toward getting this

situation resolved.” These brief statements can convey care and appreciation for the student’s experience.

It is important to note that college students are navigating a unique set of experiences that significantly impact their well-being, including the COVID-19 pandemic and sociopolitical events that evoke distress for many communities (Lederer et al., 2021; Marler et al., 2021; Office of the Surgeon General, 2021). While microaffirmations are not a comprehensive strategy to address this great and multifaceted challenge, a campus culture that actively practices affirmation between individuals does hold promise to mitigate the threats to well-being most cited in the literature. The microaffirmations students cited in this study align with the acts of social support by faculty and peers that can reduce loneliness and stress for college students (Apker, 2022). The findings of this study support how microaffirmations can help students feel seen and connected in moments when they feel alone, empowered when they feel limited in their own capacity for success, and supported when they feel underresourced or of little concern to others.

Study Limitations

All research studies have limitations. Qualitative research is reflexive and subjective in nature (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) and as such, researchers’ subjective bias may influence data analysis. In this study’s case, all authors work in higher education as scholarly practitioners serving as both educators and administrators. We each have a deep commitment to student success, take strengths-based approaches to our work, and want to see students succeed. These characteristics influence how we see and interpret the data. This viewpoint, when different from others, could be perceived as a limitation. Another potential limitation of this study is that it used self-reported data collected at the end of a semester, when students may have been fatigued. Such fatigue could have influenced student responses. It is valuable to note that participation in this study was optional and that more more-engaged students may have chosen to complete the survey than less-engaged students. More-engaged students typically have a more positive college experience, which could influence our findings. Finally, it should be noted that the research was conducted at only one institution (previously described) and that respondents were overwhelmingly female. While qualitative findings cannot be generalized to a larger population, findings of this study may be transferable to similar collegiate settings.

Further Research

There are several opportunities to further empirical work on microaffirmations. For example, more work should be done to provide training to faculty and staff. This may

entail building modules for faculty and staff development and then studying the most effective ways to deliver training on microaffirmations together with the impact of the training. As more people consider and employ microaffirmations as part of student success strategies, research examining environments rich in microaffirmations and their impact on campus climate is also worthwhile and would contribute important findings to our understanding of microaffirmations. Overall, more research elucidating what is working well for student success would be enormously beneficial to educational research. Research focusing on how to leverage and grow what is working for students and what is helping students develop a sense of belonging could be transformational and is needed to counterbalance the vast amount of research and practice in education focused on deficiency.

Conclusion

Institutions of higher education are called upon to carefully consider how best to create environments where students feel they belong (Strayhorn, 2018). Moreover, creating racially just campuses necessitates employing, training, and supporting faculty and staff who make campuses welcoming to all students (Luedke, 2023). To feel belonging, individuals must have frequent, positive interactions with other people in a group, and the group must include ongoing concern for the welfare of its members (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A sense of belonging is instrumental to developing confidence and fulfilling one's goals. Receiving attention, affirmation, recognition, and praise fuels our endeavors and self-efficacy and reinforces our understandings of ourselves. It underpins our identities and motivates us to continue with our ambitions. When people, organizations, or institutions we care about reject us or simply do not see us, we are likely to reject ourselves too. Microaffirmation is a tool to grow students' sense of belonging and cultivate confidence. When students feel belonging, they are more likely to be at ease, confident, and prepared to act in the environment for full engagement in the educational experience.

This study established that microaffirmations help build confidence among college students and motivate students to persist on their pathways to degree completion. Inviting students to describe their experiences in their own words provides an opportunity for students to reflect on, appreciate, and communicate insights on their personal development and educational experiences. As a result, this study provides insight into the lived experiences of students and details their thoughts, feelings, and opinions, including those of many who shared that they felt anonymous or invisible at points in their college careers. It also identifies applications to practice across domains of campus environment, teaching, and faculty/staff training and development. Results of this study contribute to our understanding of micromessages among undergraduate students by exploring tangible, specific, practical examples of positive, affirming communications that had the most impact for respondents. This contribution is especially powerful as data-driven technological models for retention become increasingly popular and prolific on college

campuses. Although these engineered tools are helpful, it is important to balance such efforts with human interactions that are both welcoming and affirming (Parnell, 2022). As higher education scrambles to fend off declining enrollments, we must not lose sight of the humanity of our students and our institutions. This includes recognizing students as developing people who require, above all else, the fulfillment of basic needs, including the need to belong and to achieve in the collegiate setting (Goldrick-Rab, 2021). As James, a biology and chemistry major, said about microaffirmations, “these small acts showed me that I was seen, heard, and that my feelings and problems were validated.” If all students were seen, heard, and validated, far more students would feel confident to enroll, be motivated to persist, and be prepared to graduate from our institutions of higher education.

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