Career and Calling Circles: Spaces of Belonging for First-Year Underrepresented Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe first-year underrepresented college students' sense of belonging following participation in the initial cohort of All Rise, a Career and Calling Circle (CCC). While Restorative Practices, like the circle process, have emerged in response to addressing student disciplinary issues on college campuses, little research exists as to how these approaches could be applied to proactively contribute to a sense of belonging. Specifically, this emerging intervention leverages the career interests of underrepresented (racially-minoritized, first-generation, and Pell-eligible) first-year students to create spaces that attempt to promote a sense of belonging. Understanding whether CCC contributed to the participants' sense of belonging can assist pre-professional and career advisors, faculty, and administrators in order to more fully support underrepresented pre-professional students. Interview data revealed themes related not only to making their professional goals more tangible and increasing confidence to pursue those goals, but also providing a safe space to connect with others. This suggests that CCC positively influenced students' sense of belonging both at the university and in their pre-professional journeys.

Keywords: restorative practices, circle process, sense of belonging, higher education, pre-professional, career, underrepresented, first-year

**Career and Calling Circles: Spaces of Belonging for
Underrepresented Students**

Students often enroll in college with dreams of social mobility related to pursuing a particular career or profession (e.g., doctor, nurse, lawyer, accountant, etc.). However, based on a number of factors, traditionally underserved students often determine that they do not belong in either collegiate or professional programs (Jorgenson et. al, 2018, Bodamer, 2020, & Haggins, 2020). While some emerging pre-professional programs work to support underrepresented students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, they typically focus on students who have been successful during the first two years of college or those who have gained acceptance to a professional program (Grazaniom, 2017 and O'Bryant, 2018). Existing interventions do little to promote a sense of belonging for underrepresented first-year students.

Research shows that a sense of belonging, the feeling that students matter to a college or fit in a chosen career path, is essential for student persistence and success (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Creating caring, supportive, and welcoming spaces within the university is critical to a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 4). Strayhorn (2012) defines sense of belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)" (p. 3). Perceived faculty support best supports a sense of belonging (O'Keefe, 2013). In fact, research shows that student-faculty interactions are the single most important factor in positive educational outcomes, especially for underrepresented students (Felten, 2020). Unfortunately, underrepresented students are less likely to participate in high-impact practices where such relationships are often formed (Brownell & Swaner, 2009 and Finley & McNair, 2013). Furthermore, first-generation students are more likely to live off campus, participate in fewer co-

curricular activities, and maintain lower levels of interaction with their peers and faculty (Padget, 2012). Without such experiences and connections, students miss opportunities to build relationships necessary for their success.

For these (and other) reasons, many traditionally underserved students do not finish college. Even if they do persist, they can find themselves scrambling to determine what to do after graduation and are hindered from their original career goals by poor academic performance or lack of preparation for graduate admissions exams. This paper considers an alternative approach that leverages career interest to promote a sense of belonging for underserved students in their first year.

The Circle Process

Restorative justice practices (RJP) comprise a number of approaches to address harm, do justice, and build healthy communities, including victim-offender dialogues, group conferencing, and circle processes (Zehr, 2015). Peacemaking Circles, also known as Talking Circles or Sharing Circles, originated among Native Americans and other Indigenous people and have recently been recognized in the academic literature as an "Indigenous methodological approach" (Tachine, et. al, 2017). Circles involve participants sitting together in a circle, sharing personal insights and stories, and listening to the perspectives of others in order to make decisions, resolve disagreements, learn from each other, or address harm (Pranis, 2005 & Tachine, et al, 2017). Regardless of the underlying purpose of a circle process, circles typically involve five structural elements: ceremony, a talking piece, a facilitator or keeper, guidelines and, if needed, consensus decision-making (Zehr, 2015).

Ceremony includes ways of opening and closing the circle, to set it apart in time and space and to focus specifically on the reasons participants have gathered. These include moments

of silence, prayer, reading of meaningful quotes or sacred texts, or other practices meant to

prepare participants for engaging each other, honoring their presence and participation, and

acknowledging what has been shared.

A talking piece is a physical object that is passed around the circle. The person holding

the circles has the opportunity, but not the requirement, to talk, while the other participants have

the opportunity to listen. This is used to acknowledge the equal right of participation within the

circle and is a way of holding space for all involved (even if not everyone wants to share in

response to each prompt or "round"). A talking piece usually also has some type of shared

meaning to the group or its facilitator, or serves as a symbol of values shared by the group.

The facilitator, or keeper, is the person responsible for ensuring that the circle provides

equal opportunities for participation and that the values and guidelines of the group are upheld.

This involves relinquishing control and sharing responsibility for the circle process and outcomes

with the other participants. Like other participants, the facilitator shares their own perspectives

and stories, but also often poses questions or other prompts to create space for sharing, as well as

focus the group on the purpose of the meeting.

Guidelines serve as collective commitments regarding expectations of conduct in the

circle. While circles can be single occasions, they might involve multiple meetings to fully

discuss or address an issue. The facilitator or keeper typically uses either the beginning of a

single circle or initial circles in multiple meetings to surface expectations and ensure that

participants can agree on guidelines through building consensus. Typical commitments relate to

how participants will show respect, be present, and feel safe to be their authentic selves.

Finally, if the purpose of the circles relates to a decision that the participants need to

make, consensus decision-making is used to ensure that any outcomes address the needs of all

participants. This requires time to ensure that needs have been surfaced and addressed by the solutions being formulated by the participants. If consensus cannot be reached on all needed decisions, the circle also works together to decide how to approach any remaining problems or conflict.

Both responsive and proactive circle approaches have been implemented and studied in primary and secondary schools for the purpose of addressing disciplinary issues and proactive community building (Evanovich, 2020 and Lodi, et. al., 2021). Circles have also increased in popularity on college campuses, but primarily in response to addressing student disciplinary issues (Karp, 2013). To date, there has been very little consideration in the literature regarding creating collegiate circles of support.

In other words, in the elementary and middle school context, proactive circles are considered a cutting-edge innovation that recognizes the need to establish community values and expectations of shared classroom life (Lenertz, 2018 and Arendse, 2020). However, similar approaches are currently under-explored as a solution to address university students' adjustment to campus life. As opposed to focusing solely on responsive approaches to discipline (stemming from a breach of community expectations), universities have the opportunity to proactively address students' needs related to support and belonging through proactive community-building or support circles.

The literature reveals only a few instances where universities are experimenting with such approaches. At Sassai University (Italy), faculty implemented a StudyCircles pilot project aimed at addressing issues related to first-year students' "life skills," including "struggles with self -organization, coping skills and the ability to deal with psychological issues related to anxiety; the ability to manage emotions; and the ability to develop stronger skills in managing

their own time management and study skills" (Bussu, et., al, 2018, p. 7). Under that proactive

approach, one faculty trained twenty second-year students as peer mentors to support fifty first-

year students in their transition to the university and preparation for comprehensive first-year

exams (Bussu, et. al., 2018). Inventions included creating seven sub-groups of two to three

student mentors, corresponding to the mandatory first-year curriculum (Bussu, et. al., 2018).

Each sub-group promoted several activities to support learning among the first-year students,

including proactive circles and the use of social media apps to provide discussion forums,

resources, and encouragement (Bussu, et. al, 2018).

     Semi-structured interviews and fieldwork observations revealed that first-year

participants felt (1) positive about the level of academic assistance they received with regard to

learning specific content and test preparation; (2) a greater connection to other parts of university

life; and (3) less isolation and disconnection (Bussu, et. al. 2018). According to Bussu, the

StudyCircles project "represent[ed] a new wave of restorative practices beyond conflict

resolution and the prevention of student misconduct towards the promotion of the key life skills

and the building of inclusive and caring communities" (2018, p. 9).

     Denison University has also implemented a proactive approach to support first-year

students. Advising Circle is a one-credit academic class "with limited coursework that creates a

framework for discussion and reflection," led by faculty advisors (Circling In, 2018). Advising

Circles meet weekly, usually involve ten to twelve students, and are built around social groups,

athletics, demographics (e.g., first-generation or gender) or academic disciplines (Circling In,

2018). According to Denison, they serve as a "safe place for relationships to develop, for

information to be shared, and for questions and concerns to be asked and answered openly,

without judgment" (Circling In, 2018). Internal institutional surveys at Denison indicate that

"ninety-nine percent of juniors and seniors [participants] have told [Denison their] experience [in the course] was really valuable to them" (Circling In, 2018).

Despite these efforts, little research exists regarding how university faculty might facilitate a support circle that leverages career interests to foster a sense of belonging for underserved students.

All Rise: A Career and Calling Circle

All Rise developed from a series of one-on-one semi-structured interviews with junior and senior pre-law students from underrepresented groups (racially-minoritized, first-generation, and Pell-eligible) at a private, predominately-white faith-based university in the American Southwest. Specifically, the interviews focused on those students' experiences both generally and as pre-law students at the university. The interviews were recorded via Zoom and then transcribed. Interview notes were also taken. An inductive thematic analysis was performed using Taguette, an open-source qualitative data analysis tool. Participants were informed of their right to decline participation, allowed to ask questions, and provided consent. Three themes emerged.

Career choice is influenced by perceived natural gifts, family, and social justice concerns. All of the underrepresented students explained that they came to the university intending to pursue a career in law. They also reported that from an early age (ranging from elementary to middle school), they wanted to be a lawyer based in part on personal traits closely associated with practicing law (e.g., reading, talking, arguing, debating, etc.). Most also reported someone in their immediate family encouraging that idea as well. Some also pointed to facing personal situations during their high school years that they perceived as "injustice," which furthered their interest. In this way, underrepresented pre-law students seem to come to college

believing that they were "made" to be attorneys and fight injustice.

However, these students have minimal practical knowledge of what it takes for that dream to become a reality. They know where they want to go, but are not sure how to get there. Jenson explains, "Students [are] passionate about their future, yet paralyzed . . . Students are concerned about settling for less than the best or missing out. . . . They are concerned about getting their future wrong" or [not meeting parental expectations] (Jensen, 2019, p. 28). This is especially true of Christian college students who "experience significant anxiety, angst, and pressure when it comes to calling" (Jensen 2019, p. 27). Stated another way, students felt called, but did not know how to answer.

A key consideration, therefore, in developing All Rise at a faith-based institution was to balance practical career-related information with exploring the multidimensional nature of calling beyond a career. This approach aimed at helping students "arrive at a rich understanding of vocation, one understood as faithfully living in response to God's call for the whole of life: work, family, community, church, and spirituality [and, therefore,] learning that faithful living is not living perfectly" (Jensen, p. 2019).

Therefore, prior to implementing All Rise, the faculty facilitator considered how best to leverage career interests while ultimately overcoming a narrow focus on common career education. In this regard, as opposed to directly addressing participants' career interest from the start, questions were developed for the first few CCC sessions focusing more broadly on concepts of personal values, connections, and underlying motivations. These would be followed by later circles providing internal and external career-related resources, as well as conversations from guest speakers regarding their less-than-perfect experiences. Moreover, prompts were developed that attempted to place calling in a broader context and directly address the anxiety of

perfection and overcoming adversity. Finally, the faculty facilitator also pre-developed personal

responses to such questions, in an attempt to create a space where a broad vocational context

could be explored and his own prior personal and professional challenges, disappointments and

concerns could be addressed.

Supportive relationships alleviated adversity during the first year. All of the

underrepresented students described their first year of college as very difficult and challenging.

Reasons included medical issues, differences in spiritual beliefs and backgrounds with the

majority of students, and isolation in both the classroom and in social settings. In the face of such

challenges, students pointed to supportive relationships with staff, peers, and family:

> I had a phenomenal RA my freshman year. . . . She helped me. She was from the
>
> same city as me. She . . . helped me, she was very . . . inclusive with everything. .
>
> . . [S]he was one of my saving graces here.

> I feel like once you find . . . your circle and you [are]. . . able to share . . . what
>
> everybody's going through. You're like, oh my God, I went through the same thing
>
> . . . and just do better.

Notably, these responses show that a sense of belonging and inclusion was central to

overcoming adversity in the first year. These relationships with staff and peers mediated feelings

of exclusion and isolation, and provided a sense of community. At the same time, none of the

students interviewed mentioned having significant connections to faculty members in their first

year. As previously mentioned, research shows that student-faculty interactions are the single

most important factor in positive educational outcomes, especially for underrepresented students (Felten, 2020). Faculty-student relationships are not just important in terms of a sense of belonging. According to one of the largest, national studies of student college success, faculty-student relationships have been shown to be one of the six most significant factors in student engagement both during college and beyond (Raposa, 2021). Specifically, several studies have concluded that "college-based interventions for first-generation, low-income and ethnic minority students show that supportive relationships between underrepresented students and faculty help to demystify confusing institutional systems, promote students' sense of belonging, and facilitate academic and social adjustment to college" (Raposa, 2021, p. 37).

In one study, which developed a 26-item Sense of Belonging Instrument, two of the five factors identified related directly to faculty: perceived faculty support/comfort and empathetic faculty (Hoffman, 2002). Specifically, in terms of the relationship between students and faculty, seven of the ten items included in those factors were unrelated to class or academic coursework:

- I feel comfortable talking about a problem with faculty.

- I feel comfortable socializing with a faculty member outside of class.

- I feel comfortable asking a teacher for help with a personal problem.

- I feel that a faculty member would take the time to talk to me if I needed help.

- I feel that a faculty member would be sympathetic if I was upset.

- I feel that a faculty member would be sensitive to my difficulties if I shared them.

- I feel that a faculty member really tried to understand my problem when I talked about it.

(Hoffman, 2002, p. 250-1)

According to another study, out-of-classroom faculty-student interactions qualify as high-quality

if faculty members (1) were approachable and personable; (2) had enthusiasm and passion for their work; (3) cared about students personally; and (4) served as role models and mentors (Kezar, 2014).

In short, All Rise was designed, in part, to invite students into a space where the faculty facilitator could provide direct support and authentic empathy. While other opportunities exist to develop strong faculty-student relationships, like smaller classroom sizes, learning communities, undergraduate research, traditional advising, office hours, faculty-led study abroad, and participation in faculty-advised clubs and organizations, not all of these opportunities occur during the students' first year. Moreover, such opportunities are not centered on faculty members serving as co-participant in a process like a circle, which is grounded in mutual support, personal and empathetic connection, and listening. Stated another way, while faculty members participating with students in other connective opportunities may eventually build enough trust and support to, for example, "be sensitive to [student] difficulties if [they] shared them," All Rise was created, in part, with that purpose in mind. At the same time, as the next section shows, All Rise was not devoid of academic purpose. Instead, it considered how the circle could create clear pathways between faculty-student relationships and students' academic plans and professional interests.

Desire for early career-based information in a relational context. In terms of what the university could do to improve its support of underserved pre-law students, the participants focused almost exclusively on the desire to have information earlier in their college career to better understand what is required and how to best prepare for law school both academically and professionally. Many expressed frustrations about not receiving important information until it was too late, including the importance of (1) grades in non-major courses in the graduate

admissions process, (2) early Law School Admission Test (LSAT) preparation, (3) internship

opportunities, and (4) the law school application process and related costs. More specifically, the

phrase "breaking down the process" was frequently used. However, students' responses also

made it clear that information alone was not enough. Instead, they expressed a strong desire to

connect with and receive support from both the faculty pre-law advisor and peers:

I know we have different [pre-law] things, but that's for everybody. [We need

time] for first-year minorities or first-generation students . . . to go sit down [with

the] pre-law person to . . . see what the whole idea is [and] to make sure that's

what they really wanna do. [A place of only freshmen] so [you] don't worry about

. . . asking weird questions [or] about being wrong . . . [J]ust a bunch of freshmen

getting together to . . . . feel supported . . . instead of think[ing] you're alone.

First-gen and minority students . . . have so many expectations from their parents .

. . It's like, you have to do this, you have to do that. And . . . if you don't follow

through with what you said you were gonna do, your parents and family might be

like, then what are you doing with your life? So if you're going to introduce all of

that in the beginning, also . . . explain and . . . don't just, like, set more

expectations for them . . . . Actually, help them work through it and . . . break it

down.

Mentoring sessions, but . . . in a casual setting. It's hard to say . . . I'm really

scared about this next process, you know? And . . . being very honest and

vulnerable about . . . what the future holds and if we're gonna get accepted or not,

stuff that we don't want to fess up to.

These themes again reflect the importance of faculty-staff relationships in helping

students in very direct and personal ways as opposed to simply pointing them to online resources

or other static or generic information. Specifically, students expressed a desire for the faculty

advisor to "sit down," "work through it and . . . break it down," and serve as a mentor. In short,

providing them with resources in a relational context. However, there was also a strong need to

be understood, recognized, and supported based on their unique backgrounds and provided with

spaces to interact in honest and vulnerable ways.

This is reflective of research indicating underserved students are more likely to be

independent and not typically engage with faculty by asking questions, while other students are

more likely to engage or reach out to faculty and other on-campus resources (A. Yee, 2016,

Nunn, 2021). For example, research shows that first-generation students often perceive asking

questions of faculty or seeking out help to be off-putting or disrespectful (Nunn, 2021).

Implications for this research include faculty taking responsibility to understand the needs of

underserved students and proactively engage with students while also viewing their

independence as a strength (as opposed to perceiving it students as disengaged, passive, and

apathetic) (A. Yee, 2016). Specifically, it is suggested that "[f]aculty . . . establish structured

opportunities . . . to connect with all students [and] [a]cademic support staff must recognize that

existing models of delivering support, which typically require students to initiate interaction, do

not equally serve all students' needs" (A. Yee 2016, p. 854). Again, pointing to resources

without engaging students is not enough. Instead, these responses and research require a new

approach.

Implementation of All Rise

When alternative formats for support were explored including individual advising sessions, group information sessions, and the circle process, all students interviewed expressed support for using some form of a circle process to engage students in these supportive conversations. Therefore, considering the themes and research set out above, All Rise was designed to leverage underrepresented students' general interests related to a career or profession to enhance their sense of belonging through the creation of a faculty-facilitated supportive space.

The initial cohort of All Rise was launched in Spring 2022 at the same university where the interviews were conducted. In late fall, the faculty pre-law advisor sent an email inviting twenty-six underrepresented first-year students with an expressed interest in pre-law to participate in All Rise. These prospective participants were identified through the university admissions process, which includes questions related to students' interest in pre-professional programs, including pre-law. Students were encouraged to participate through the offer of two incentives: (1) those who attended five of the six planned meetings would receive a free copy of Mike Kim's *The LSAT Trainer* and (2) students could obtain one Spiritual Formation Credit for each meeting. (Students at the university are required to obtain 55 credits per semester.) Seven students expressed initial interest and four students participated in the cohort.

The faculty pre-law advisor facilitated All Rise, which met six times over the course of the semester on Sunday evenings. Meetings were held on campus, where a meal was shared followed by time together in the circle. Meetings lasted about an hour to an hour and a half in total and circles utilized the following format: (1) the facilitator opened the circle with a time of silence; (2) the facilitator invited participants to share personal stories or reflections on various topics through focused conversations; (3) a wooden gavel was used as a talking piece; (4) prior

to closing, participants were invited to share anything else they wanted to with the circle; and (5) pre-assigned members closed the circle with a meaningful scripture or quote of their choice.

Early on, All Rise focused on establishing its own "guiding principles" through directed discussions around the purpose of All Rise, which was to provide support by connecting to each other and pre-law resources. In this regard, questions were posed asking participants what they would need from the group in order to share stories about themselves and participate fully in the circle. Based on these discussions, participants developed, discussed, and agreed to adhere to the following principles:

1) Being honest

2) Having an open mind and depth

3) Ensuring what is said in the circle, stays in the circle

4) Creating a safe space of sharing stories about self in order to grow

Throughout the semester, questions and visualization exercises related to creating connections and highlighting internal and external resources. The facilitator also invited three underrepresented student guests to participate in the circle during specific weeks: a current pre-law upperclassman, a recent pre-law graduate, and a third-year law student, who graduated from the university. Circle outlines, based in part on the work of Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2015), are attached (Appendix A). Additionally, in order to utilize the circle for consensus decision-making, All Rise worked together with an external designer to develop a logo, which was later turned into a sticker and used to identify All Rise both on the university website and program letterhead (Appendix B). Specifically, this included multiple rounds of feedback and input from the All Rise participants to jointly agree on a final design.

Evaluating All Rise

At the end of the semester, participants were invited to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews, lasting around an hour in length. Interview notes were also taken. An inductive thematic analysis was performed using Taguette. Participants were informed of their right to decline participation, allowed to ask questions, and provided consent.

Outcomes

From the student interviews, participants reported positive experiences that reflected the expressed needs of the upper-class students interviewed in the development stage. Specifically, three themes emerged. In regard to moving from a general passion or calling to having practical information regulated to realistic next steps formed through relationships, the participants articulated that All Rise (1) made their professional goals more tangible and (2) provided relief and confidence related to the law school process. In regard to the lack of faculty-student relational support, participants expressed that All Rise also (3) provided a safe space to connect with others. These themes also reflect what educational research has concluded are the "universal" needs that drive motivation: a sense of competence and belonging (Evans, 2016).

Tangible Goals. Participants reported that All Rise and the resources it provided changed the way they perceived their professional goals making it "more real":

Wanting to go down this career path is . . . a very daunting thing, . . . but . . . it seems a lot more accessible in this format that you've provided and . . . all of the resources that you've given all of us.

Sometimes there's not a plan in place. And it's really hard to find that kind of information on the internet. Cause it's kind of like a gray mass of information. . . . [I]t's better to have someone who has had hands-on experience with that rather than just, like, trying to see what the internet has to offer.

[This helped me in] putting less stress on my shoulders because [before there was this] kind of ambiguity of what to expect with law school, or at least like that path. [I thought] you have to be good at everything. You don't have, like, any wiggle room. I think with the . . . perception that I had before, there was this really big line in terms of what I had to reach for and always worried about falling short of it. But, I think identifying smaller goals in approaching that line has been much easier for me . . . . [Having] all these smaller goals to implement instead of . . . aimlessly shooting [has] helped a lot. That contributed to allowing me a little bit more room to breathe.

Relief and Confidence. Students also expressed that participation in All Rise contributed to their sense of relief and confidence related to their professional goals:

All Rise wasn't what I expected it to be. I expected this to be, like, really cold and stale. We would sit down at dinner, and they would talk about things that I did not understand. Like a huge board of adult white men that are telling me that I'm not prepared to take on what I want to take on. [Instead, it was] a small circle of people who understand what I'm going through and are very sympathetic and dealing with their own things. I think it's

much, much, much better than [what I expected]. It doesn't provide any sort of stress, but actually kind of gives a sense of relief.

Something that helped a lot was [the guest speaker] being really honest about her experiences going through law school and [how it] is really difficult, but it is very doable. I think that is especially reassuring.

These responses related to tangibility, relief, and confidence reflect that All Rise made the goals of getting accepted into law school more realistic by providing practical steps that students could take while simultaneously lowering their anxiety about achieving perfection. Like the original student interviews, All Rise participants all expressed an early calling to a career in law. At the same time, the above statements show that prior to All Rise, they were daunted by a gray mass of anxiety-causing ambiguity. In short, they knew what they wanted to do, but had no idea of how to create a plan or follow a path to get there. Based on that, they anticipated having to be perfect to accomplish that goal without any possibility or room for error and, therefore, anticipated falling short. According to these statements, All Rise not only provided students with smaller steps to accomplish their goals, but provided them with lived experiences of others accomplishing similar goals, despite missteps along the way.

Connections to Others in a Safe Space. Beyond professional requirements, students repeatedly identified All Rise as a safe space where they made connections with others, including faculty. Specifically, students pointed to being able to talk to the faculty facilitator and their peers about struggles related to academics, mental health, family, and finances:

I've always felt really welcome in the space, and that's been really important to me to

share my personal struggles and to share everything that's going on without any sort of

judgment, but also a sense of support.

Having that community where . . . we are all gonna be facing the same challenges has

been really good for me.

It was really reassuring for me to know that [while] I don't know what exactly this looks

like, I'm not the only one that isn't sure of that. Having that little safe space of talking

about anything personal or academic is really nice to come back to, especially because

[while] therapy's great, it's different whenever you're talking to people one on one and it's

not a person that you are paying.

If I have questions about stuff [or] If I have any questions in the future, then I know

exactly who to look to if I need help.

These comments reveal that students recognized All Rise as more than something strictly

related to academics and career preparation. Instead, students describe this faculty-facilitated

"space" as welcoming, personal, supportive, community-oriented, safe, and reassuring. These

descriptions track closely with what the research shows foster students' sense of belonging.

More specifically, these responses support the idea that All Rise created a caring, supportive, and

welcoming space that resulted in students feeling the sensation of connectedness, mattering or

feeling cared about at the university (Stayhorn, 2012, p. 3). Finally, the comments revealed the

perceived continuing nature of the supportive relationship between students and their faculty and peers. Participants recognized that All Rise was the beginning of a journey that had multiple steps and, as they continue on that journey, they are not alone.

Discussion

In terms of the circle process itself, it would be hard to imagine the depth of felt academic and personal support expressed by the students emerging for any other standard academic or career advising model. For example, students described their perceptions of traditional impersonal and surface-level approaches as cold, stale, and disempowering, while those based on internet sources were described as ambiguous, challenging, and inaccessible. On the other hand, the warm relationship developed in circle between students and their faculty facilitator, peers, and upperclassmen shone through as vital to the level of advising support and sense of community students derived from All Rise. In this way, not only did students express relief and confidence related to their career goals, but they also established stronger connections with others.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this research was limited to a small cohort of students at a single university, it provides insight into how similar faculty-driven interventions may be used. Based on interviews with All Rise participants, the faculty facilitator will test different approaches to increasing the number of students involved including (1) shifting the intervention to the fall semester as opposed to the spring; (2) sending out invitations prior to a student's arrival on campus; (3) meeting during the week as opposed to Sunday night. Additional modifications related to adopting forms of career and calling circles include expanding to other pre-professional programs or exploratory career or disciplinary cohorts, especially for academic programs that do

not connect directly to specific careers (e.g., liberal arts and social sciences clusters). Faculty could also consider how other forms of community-building/support circles could be used both inside and outside of class. For example, the circle process might be used to welcome new students into a department as part of orientation or discuss learning covenants or community standards regarding academic integrity. Thought should also be given to how best to include and integrate any university support staff specifically focused on advising or student retention (i.e., partnering in facilitation or hosting a career and calling circle). Finally, there is a potential to expand this intervention to the second through the fourth year of undergraduate study, develop longitudinal studies for specific cohorts, and/or consider how circles might shape participants' intrinsic/extrinsic career motivations.

Conclusion

This study suggests that All Rise created a space that positively influenced students' sense of belonging both at the university and in their pre-professional journey. As universities, and faculty specifically, continue to consider how best to not only retain but support their first-year underserved students, CCCs are an emerging model that deserves further exploration and study.

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Appendix A

All Rise Topics and Questions

<u>Circle 1</u> (Values and Connections)

- Share a story from last semester about something that was hard or a challenge for you.

- If you had one word to describe how you feel starting this semester, what would it be? Why?

- Why did you say "yes" to be part of this group?

- Share a story about how someone else has helped you succeed in the past.

- Visualize that you are a lawyer. What do you see? What is clear/cloudy?

<u>Circle 2</u> (Motivations and Next Steps)

- What is your favorite and least favorite course so far this semester? Why?

- If everything worked out perfectly, what would success look like for you?

- Share a story of where something did not work out as you planned and something you took away from it.

- As you anticipate applying to law school, what do you want to learn about the process?

<u>Circle 3</u> (Internal Resources)

- What is hard for you right now? What is providing you hope?

- Share a story where you did something you were not sure if you could do.

- Who would you call first if you needed help? Why?

- [After providing an overview of internal resources for pre-law and other general students' success services], what is missing? What more could the university do to support you? What could I do individually to help?

Circle 4 (Preparation)

- [Welcome upper-class pre-law first-generation students and explain the circle values process]
- If you had one word to describe where you are at midterms, what would it be?
- [Summarize internal resources conversation for guest]
- [Introduce the guest and ask her to share related to her background, coming to university, and the decision to pursue law school]
- What questions or comments do you have for [our guest]?
- [To guest] As you prepare for the LSAT, what advice would you give your freshman self?

Circle 5 (Application)

- [Welcome recently graduated pre-law first-generation minority student, who was actively applying to law school, and explain the circle values process]
- What was the highlight of your spring break? Why?
- [Summarize internal resources conversation for guest]
- [Introduce the guest and ask her to share related to her background, coming to university, and the decision to pursue law school]
- What questions or comments do you have for [our guest]?

- [To guest] Please share what you consider your greatest success and challenge at university.

- [To guest] Looking back on your pre-law application process, what advice would you give your freshman self?

Circle 6 (External Resources and Law School - Via Zoom)

- [Welcome minority alumnus currently in 3rd year of law school and explain the circle values process]

- [Provide overview of several external resources]

- [Introduce the guest and ask her to share related to her background, university experience (including resources utilized), and law school experience]

- What questions or comments do you have for [our guest]?

- [To guest] As you think back over your law school experience, what advice would you give your first-year self?]

Appendix B