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CREATING A SENSE OF BELONGING FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Hannah Gumbert

August 2020

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Hannah Marie Gumbert

entitled

Creating a Sense of Belonging for College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder:
A Case Study Analysis

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
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Abstract

Higher education institutions exist to prepare individuals academically, personally and socially for life after college. However, individuals with special needs, specifically those with “invisible disabilities” like autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are often overlooked or left out in discussions about higher education. The purpose of this study was to develop a greater understanding of how a sense of belonging affects a student’s experience in higher education when they have a diagnosis of autism and how institutions can create a successful environment of belonging for their students with ASD. The study implemented a case study design and interviewed current students and staff members at a small private Christian college in the Midwest to accurately capture their experience. The results revealed that students with ASD are able to experience a sense of belonging when given the proper relationships and tools to succeed. Despite the limits of studying one single institution, other colleges and universities may significantly benefit from thoughtful consideration, adaption, and implementation of the results.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“For my entire life, I have searched for a sense of belonging—for friends my own age, a club, or a community where I can be myself and feel at home.”

Norman, a college student with autism spectrum disorder
(Laursen & Yazdgerdi, 2012, p. 45).

Norman was a college-age student with autism spectrum disorder enrolled in college to pursue a degree in engineering. Norman graduated from high school with a GPA greater than a 4.0 with an interest in and knowledge of airplanes that far exceeded the average person. However, in the second semester of college, Norman withdrew because he could not “navigate the social maze and lack of innate structure of college life” (Laursen & Yazdgerdi, 2012, p. 45). There are many stories similar to Norman’s of students failing to complete an education—not because of the academic rigor but because of the difficulty navigating the social environment present within higher education environments. How then can higher education institutions create an environment that provides a sense of belonging for students with autism spectrum disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder

According to the American Psychiatric Association’s (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, autism is a lifelong developmental disorder with common features such as social-communication deficits and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of activities, interests, and sensory sensitivities. Autism diagnoses are made along a spectrum or continuum, ranging from mild to severe, with each

individual case presenting differently. With such a wide array of cases, it becomes difficult for institutions to provide accommodations tailored to each specific student on the autism spectrum. However, the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (1973) detail that no agency that receives federal financial aid may exclude, deny benefits to, or discriminate against those with a disability but must provide reasonable accommodations. Therefore, any higher education institution that receives any form of federal financial aid is required to provide accommodations to students diagnosed with a disability, including those with autism spectrum disorder.

Kem College

For the sake of confidentiality, the researcher used a pseudonym throughout the paper when discussing the participating school and participants. Located in a small town in the Midwest, Kem College exists to educate and train students with intellectual and developmental disabilities by equipping them to reach independence through the development of vocational, social, and life skills while focusing on God's plan for their lives. Seeking to be more than a school focused on academics, Kem prides itself on being a "safe-haven" where students can develop "healthy spiritual and social lives." At Kem College, staff and faculty strive to create a learning environment where students feel accepted, included, and valued in the education process, in order to create an environment where students feel as though they belong.

Operating as a post-secondary school, Kem works with approximately 85 students each year who complete a three-year program focusing in one of three areas: culinary, horticulture, and technology. Since its inception, Kem has served families and

individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities through the education process. Opening its doors as a home and school for children, Kem sought to provide resources and services missing in public education. Later, the college was created to continue to provide for the educational needs of the students as they aged.

Sense of Belonging

Schlossberg's (1989) work on marginality and mattering in conjunction with Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) study of mattering illustrates the significance of feeling dependable, needed, and cared for. When students feel that they matter, they develop a sense of group ownership, feeling central to the group, important, and as though they belong. Goodenow (1993) stated that "a sense of belonging or psychological membership in the school or classroom is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). Belonging encompasses more than just trying to make every student feel accepted and "safe"; experiencing a sense of belonging can even affect one's physical health (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Feeling secure in one's belonging has been shown to help with relationship building, educational retention rates, and job readiness (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

As defined by the American Psychiatric Association's (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, those with a diagnosis of autism struggle to form close relationships with others. However, just because this is a prominent characteristic does not mean that creating social interactions and friendships with others becomes irrelevant or impossible. When individuals experience uncertainty about whether they belong, it can undermine their performance and health (Walton & Cohen, 2011). As

Kem College works with students with a variety of intellectual disabilities, the school is challenged to face the issue of belonging and its effects, working with students to prepare them for success in the future.

The Current Study

The study of psychology has devoted much research to students with autism spectrum disorder and how they can best be educated and understood while participating in primary and secondary education. Similar research has been neglected, however, for those same students who choose to pursue postsecondary education. In regard to educating those with intellectual disabilities, Kem College has worked to create a successful model that helps these students flourish. Therefore, the research conducted for this present study explored the current practices used by Kem College to create an environment in which students experience a sense of belonging. The study was driven by the following research questions:

1. How does creating a sense of belonging affect a student's experience in higher education when they have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder?
2. How do higher education institutions create a sense of belonging with a focus on interpersonal relationship development for students with autism spectrum disorder?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

Higher education institutions exist to prepare individuals academically, personally, and socially for life after college. Unfortunately, individuals with special needs are often overlooked or left out of discussions about higher education. Though colleges and universities have been enrolling more individuals with special needs, it can be easy for schools to forget or miss students who have invisible disabilities or those not easily observed such as autism spectrum disorders (Pinder-Amaker, 2014).

Abraham Maslow, a 20th century American psychologist, formulated a theory related to the needs of human beings. He developed a hierarchy consisting of five tiers or levels that individuals need in order to possess a general sense of wellbeing: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Each tier represents a “need” that one must have met. Individuals must work to satisfy each need, moving towards self-actualization (Burton, 2017). All institutions must recognize the basic levels of human needs for food, shelter, and safety while providing avenues through which these needs can be satisfied.

While institutions are expected to produce well-educated, productive citizens who contribute to the betterment of society, they are not required to make students feel as though they belong. However, according to Maslow (1943, as cited in Burton, 2017),

self-esteem and self-actualization—or the fulfillment of one’s potential—only occurs when the need to belong is met. Thus, institutions that want to produce the best and brightest students need to focus on creating a sense of belonging. Focusing on creating a place where physiological, safety, and belonging needs are met can help lead to the holistic development of students.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

The following literature review focuses on defining and understanding the overarching nature of autism spectrum disorder, why belonging matters, and what an environment of belonging looks like for a student with autism spectrum disorder.

Autism defined. Students with disabilities are attending postsecondary school in greater numbers than ever before, and many choose to live on campus (Miele, Kelly, & Hamrick, 2018). Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in particular arrive on campuses throughout the world seeking academic success but struggle because of the challenges stemming from their diagnoses (Ashbaugh, Koegel, & Koegel, 2017; Miele et al., 2018; White et al., 2017). According to the American Psychiatric Association’s (2013) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, autism is a lifelong developmental disorder with common features such as social-communication deficits and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of activities, interests, and sensory sensitivities. Autism spectrum disorder is diagnosed along a continuum with each individual with a diagnosis of ASD expressing these characteristics at varying degrees, ranging from mild to severe. Unfortunately, no medical test can confirm a diagnosis. However, trained healthcare providers can diagnosis ASD based on the presenting behaviors and the patient’s history.

Autism was not a diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) until the fourth edition came out in 1994, making it a relatively newly recognized disorder with its prevalence increasing since its inclusion (Pinder-Amaker, 2014; Smith, 2007). Based on the Center for Disease Control and Preventions estimate of the frequency of autism in eight-year-olds, one in every 59 children were diagnosed with ASD in 2014; this represents an increase from one in every 150 children in 2000 (Baio et al., 2018). With the chance of children being diagnosed with ASD nearly tripling, the awareness of needed provisions and accommodations is increasingly urgent.

K-12 educational support. The increase in the prevalence of ASD is multidimensional. Since autism research has increased, individuals are being diagnosed at younger ages, and those who were overlooked or struggled through school are now receiving a diagnosis in their adult years (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). While in K-12, students who have an individualized education plan are legally entitled under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) to a transition plan (Individuals with Disabilities Act, 1975). Transition plans are designed through a partnership with the student, school staff, and parents to outline the next steps to be taken by that student after completing high school. For some individuals, this means continuing their education through a program at a college or university.

During K-12, schools are also required to provide accommodations to individuals with disabilities under the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Smith, 2007; White et al., 2017). Accommodations are those modifications that are added or removed to help individuals with a disability to complete the tasks at hand.

Postsecondary education support. Legally, postsecondary schools are not required to provide as thorough and overarching support systems or accommodations as K-12 (Hadley, 2017). Postsecondary school, since its beginning, has been deemed an optional educational endeavor, allowing for restrictions on who is allowed and able to attend through the enactment of an application and/or interview process. However, the ADA has set up guidelines to help students gain access by providing a legal mandate prohibiting higher education institutions from denying acceptance based on the student's diagnosis. Over the years, other legislation such as the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008) has helped to widen the gate for more individuals to experience higher education.

Support in higher education institutions provides a significant paradigm shift in comparison to K-12 education specifications. At the college and university level, support takes the form of services such as note-takers, adaptive computer equipment, audio textbooks, and tutors (Hadley, 2017). Students remain in the classroom with their peers, not leaving for extra attention or special help. Full inclusion is the only teaching environment that exists, where those who have been diagnosed with a special need must be educated alongside their typically developing peers in the same classroom and through the same teaching practices (Mesibov & Shea, 1996).

Students must make an intentional effort to seek support from both their professors and others. Many students with ASD lack the ability or knowledge to advocate for themselves in school—this is especially difficult for first-time students. Under ADA (1990), individuals over the age of 18 are able to still receive services as long as they disclose their disability (White et al., 2017). In the college environment,

accommodations and services are made available only after one chooses to disclose their diagnosis and need for support, unlike K-12 education (De Los Santos & Maxwell, 2018). Individuals may choose not to disclose this information for many reasons: a reluctance to open up—typically from negative past experiences—a lack of awareness that resources are available, a fear of being discriminated against or labeled, or in some cases believing they no longer have a disability (Cai & Richdale, 2016). However, research has found that students who choose to disclose their disability in their first semester or year at a college or university are more likely to graduate than those that disclose at a later date (Hudson, 2013). Universities have offices or staff dedicated to the support of disability students. Students with disabilities should be encouraged by these offices or staff to disclose their disability, not out of fear but out of hope for the future.

Higher education not only is a place where individuals with ASD can further their education but also serves as a venue for teaching personal skill building, strengthening their chances of future employment, increasing self-confidence, and learning independent living skills and those needed for integrating into a community (Hart, Grigal, & Weir, 2010; VanBergeijk, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008; Zafft, Hart, & Zimbrich, 2004). Conversely, higher education institutions can be isolating places for individuals with ASD. Many drop out because they feel socially isolated, struggle to make the necessary changes in their routines, experience problems with living away from home, or have a lack of external guidance (Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter, 2004).

Students with a diagnosis of ASD have limited understanding of their emotional states and how they direct their emotions onto objects and others. Due to their own limited emotional awareness, these individuals also have limited emotional awareness of

those around them (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). Often, it can become one of the biggest barriers for students to make connections with others on campus, impacting their overall experience and how they navigate the social environment.

Belonging

Definition of belonging. Goodenow (1993) defined belonging as “a sense of belonging or psychological membership in the school or classroom... the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (p. 80). Experiencing a sense of belonging is crucial to academic engagement, school retention, participation, and personal growth (Goodenow, 1993). Laursen and Yazdgerdi (2012) also defined belonging as “one’s need to feel valued, important, and protected by others, to feel comfortable and welcomed within a group whether with family, friends, or peers” (p. 46). They clarified that belonging is much more than a cognitive process that can be thought through and created; rather, it must be experienced and lived out (Laursen & Yazdgerdi, 2012).

Why belonging matters. Experiencing a sense of social belonging is essential to human behavior, without which individuals can experience harm to their well-being, intellectual achievement, and even immune function and health (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Walton and Cohen (2011) highlighted just how important it is for someone to feel included because a single instance of exclusion can undermine individuals’ well-being, intelligence, test performance, and self-control long term. For individuals such as those with ASD who have an innate difficulty engaging in social interactions, understanding social cues, and carrying on substantial conversations, they may find themselves not easily included, leaving them marginalized and alone.

All individuals experience marginality at some point in their lives. Schlossberg's (1989) research on marginality and mattering in higher education recognized how common feeling marginalized arises during periods of changes and transitions; marginalization can lead individuals to the conclusion that they do not matter, that no one can depend on them, that no one is interested, and that no one is concerned about them. Schlossberg (1989), in conjunction with his work with Rosenberg, identified five domains of mattering—attention, importance, ego-extension, dependence and appreciation—suggesting that mattering influences behavior (p. 8). When students feel as though they matter, they behave as though they matter:

Institutions that focus on mattering and greater student involvement will be more successful in creating campuses where students are motivated to learn, where their retention is high, and ultimately, where their institutional loyalty for the short- and long-term future is ensured. (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 15).

Goffman (1963) referred to marginalized individuals as the “stigmatized,” stating that often “[t]he central feature of the stigmatized individual’s situation in life . . . is a question of what is often . . . called ‘acceptance’” (p. 8). The marginalized and stigmatized are hyper-focused on how and where they can find acceptance. This questioning of one’s acceptance can be compounded for those with ASD, as another common characteristic of those diagnosed is a strong fixation on certain things. Osterman (2000) posited that, while experiencing acceptance has shown to influence multiple facets of an individual’s life, most schools integrate and implement practices that actually weaken students’ feeling of inclusion in supportive communities by focusing more so on academic accomplishment than community and collaboration.

Individuals with ASD want to be part of social interactions and have friendships just like everyone else. Even though the nature of one's diagnosis recognizes that they have poor social skills, this does not mean they do not notice that they are different or when they are being excluded. Sebastian, Blakemore, and Charman (2009) completed a study to measure inclusion and ostracism among individuals with ASD compared to their typically developing peers. The results showed that the individuals with autism were able to recognize when they were being excluded but had difficulty putting into words their emotions related to the exclusion. Exclusion can be detrimental to mental, emotional, and even physical health, thus reinforcing just how important a sense of belonging is for an individual to thrive.

Impact of belonging. Postsecondary education is an elective educational endeavor. There is no legal mandate for individuals to further their education beyond K-12 school, but it is a valuable investment of one's time and resources that offers many financial, social, and personal benefits (Webb, Patterson, Syverud, & Seabrooks-Blackmore, 2008). Research shows students who feel cared for in their educational environment perform better and stay enrolled through completion (O'Keeffe, 2013). Creating a sense of belonging in college has proven to prevent attrition especially for those considered most at risk, which includes individuals with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (O'Keeffe, 2013). In fact, Heisserer and Parette (2002) went as far as to state that "the single most important factor in advising students who are at-risk is helping them to feel that they are cared for by the institution" (p. 75). Graham-Smith and Lafayette (2004) argued that "care overcomes the sense of isolation and separateness that a student with disabilities feels and gives him/herself the permission to nevertheless

belong and succeed in a frightening and challenging college environment” (p. 90). In a study conducted by Graham-Smith and Lafayette (2004) interviewing individuals with disabilities, 69% of the individuals surveyed believe that a caring and secure environment is the most important component to make it through the college years. If students are going to stay at a school, they must be able to identify that they belong at the institution and in their area of study. Connection and belonging starts with a single individual; one single relationship with a key person can strengthen one’s decision to stay in college (O’Keeffe, 2013). There is power in belonging.

Those students who feel secure in their belonging have been found to initiate social interactions more often and form more successful relationships on campus (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Maslow’s hierarchy of needs can provide a valid framework for facilitating this sense of security and belonging. A student must have one’s most basic physiological needs met first and foremost: food, air, shelter, sleep, and clothing. Next, one must feel physically safe in their environment. Following, students must be surrounded by caring individuals, both staff and students, whom they engage with regularly. Students must feel as though they are an important part of the life and activity of the classroom and university.

Learning theorist Etienne Wenger (2009) made a strong case for the theory of learning through social participation; he believed that “communities of practice sprout everywhere” and “in spite of curriculum, discipline, and exhortation, the learning that is more personally transformative turns out to be the learning that involves membership in these communities of practice” (p. 212). This participation involves “being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation

to these communities” (Wenger, 2009, p. 210). He argued that real learning happens in informal settings, such as on the playground or in day-to-day encounters in which individuals find themselves. Wenger (2009) did not discredit such educational components as classrooms, training sessions, textbooks, and exams but to shed light on the social nature of learning. When viewed in conjunction with Maslow, Wenger’s research established a strong base for looking beyond simply taking an academic approach to learning and, instead, moving toward interpersonal interaction as the foundation upon which academia may be built.

Conclusion

The review of the literature highlights a basic understanding of what autism is and what it means to belong. Individuals who have a diagnosis of ASD all differ; however, all also share common characteristics such as communication deficits, challenges with social skills, and different forms of sensory processing. Belonging is an experience that individuals seek in order to feel valued, important, and comfortable. Those who do not feel as though they belong often get lost along the way and struggle to persist in situations. Based on the foundations laid by the literature, the current study focused on creating an environment within higher education institutions that supports both the learning and belonging needs for students with autism spectrum disorder.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Purpose and Design

The purpose of this study was to explore how higher education institutions can create a sense of belonging for their students who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Specifically, this was explored by examining the avenues through which Kem College fosters an environment where students find purpose and belonging. A qualitative case study design was used in order to gather data focusing on the typical experience of a Kem College student. Creswell (2013) highlighted that case study research studies “real-life, bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection” (p. 97). Case studies allow researchers to gain a more holistic understanding of a particular case. Thus, the end goal was to attain a holistic understanding of Kem’s philosophy for creating a sense of belonging for the students with autism that attend the institution.

Collecting qualitative data via a case study allowed the researcher to gain the most detailed understanding of the participant experience. The researcher explored the experience of students at Kem through interviews in focus groups with different members of the community. The data collected through these interactions was then coded for themes. The themes provided a focused understanding of the environment that is present for the students with autism.

Context

Located in a small Midwestern town, Kem College is a small, evangelical higher education institution dedicated to serving students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. With its roots in ministry, Kem began in 1962 serving children and families in order to fill an education gap parents were noticing in the public school system. In 2008, Kem began focusing on adults by providing a three-year higher educational program geared toward training students in specialized areas related to culinary arts, horticulture, and technology. Kem's mission is to train and educate students with disabilities (developmental and intellectual) by equipping them to gain independence through social, vocational, and personal skills, all while maintaining a focus on God's plan for their lives. Kem's goal is to equip students individually to achieve their own personal form of appropriate independence equipping them for success in the future.

Participants

Participants included student life staff, academic program staff, and current students. Student life staff members work hands on with the students after academic hours, assisting with activities needed for independent living (e.g., cooking and cleaning). Academic program staff hold positions as instructors, paraprofessionals, or advisors. These individuals work with students during class hours, teaching and assisting students in all areas related to academics. The researcher conducted two focus groups—one with seven participants and the other with nine—divided by their area of work as either student life staff or academic program staff. Student participation involved two focus groups with current students who willingly identify as having a diagnosis of ASD and who chose to participate. The researcher interviewed seven student participants

identified through faculty nomination. All participation in the study was purely voluntary with no compensations or anticipated risks associated with involvement in the study.

Procedures

The researcher visited Kem College prior to conducting research in order to better understand the culture and dynamics of the school. After receiving approval from both the dean of students at Kem College and the IRB committee at the researcher's home institution, the researcher visited Kem College one more time in order to collect data through a series of focus groups and interviews with the participants mentioned above.

Research consisted of two focus groups with employees, one with student life staff and the other with academic program staff. Both focus groups were conducted face-to-face and were recorded and transcribed. The participants were asked to reveal their job title at the beginning of the focus group to provide clarification; however, all other questions were focused on topics related to the college's mission, student and staff relationships, and the college's focus on social belonging (see Appendix A).

The students also participated in a face-to-face focus group discussion, recorded by the researcher for future transcription. The students answered questions related to the college's mission, student and staff relationships, and the college's focus on social belonging (see Appendix B). Both students and staff were given the opportunity to freely express their thoughts and feelings.

Prior to conducting the official interviews at Kem College, a pilot interview was conducted to evaluate the protocol and make any necessary changes. The pilot interview was conducted with a staff member at a small, faith-based, liberal arts college who works directly with students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Facilitating a trial

interview allowed for the researcher to assess the quality of the protocol and make necessary improvements.

Upon arriving at the interview, participants received an informed consent form that was read and signed before beginning. Participants were notified that a recording device was going to be used to assure accuracy and that the recording would not be shared or available to anyone but the researcher. The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 35 to 60 minutes each.

Data Analysis

After completing all group interviews, the researcher transcribed the responses. The interview data was coded and synthesized, identifying themes that represent the opinions, beliefs, and results presented by the staff and students at Kem College.

Validity is important to any research process, keeping researchers accountable to both obtaining the most accurate data and presenting what is right and correct. Creswell (2013) emphasized the need for researchers to “employ accepted strategies [in order] to document the accuracy of their studies” (p. 250). The researcher’s analysis of the data was verified through a member checking approach. Staff participants were given the opportunity to proofread the themes and provide feedback for accuracy and validity.

Conclusion

When selecting the research design, participants, and analysis technique, the goal was to provide the best understanding of the organizational and experiential aspects of Kem College while maintaining originality to the lived experience. Ultimately, the broader goal was to draw forth themes from the collected data that would prove applicable to higher education institutions of all types.

Chapter 4

Results

Overview

As previously stated, this study looked at current practices used by Kem College to create an environment in which students experience a sense of belonging. The study was driven by the following research questions:

1. How does creating a sense of belonging effect a student's experience in higher education when they have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder?
2. How do higher education institutions create a sense of belonging with a focus on interpersonal relationship development for students with autism spectrum disorder?

Data was gathered through the use of four focus groups with a total of 16 current staff members and 8 students. One student chose to withdraw from the study in the middle of the focus group, leading the researcher to negate any information gathered from the participant. In total, data was gathered, transcribed, and coded from 23 participants. The researcher gathered the data through semi-structured interviews with the researcher presenting a statement or topic and following up with a variety of questions to spark conversations (see Appendices A & B). The following themes and sub-themes arose from this process.

Student Themes

Table 1

Major Themes and Sub-Themes for Students

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Friendships</u>	<u>Hardships</u>	<u>Staff Support</u>
Sub-Themes	Difficulties	Time	In Class
	Support	Support	Out of Class

When asked, “Do you feel like you belong here at Kem?” six of the seven students said they felt they belonged at Kem. But what makes them feel as though they belong? What happens in the community at Kem that has led 85% of the students interviewed to identify that they belong at their chosen institution? Below, the gathered data is explored as it relates to friendships, hardships, and staff support and how each of these have led the six students to state that they belong at Kem College.

Friendships. The researcher posed two statements related to friendships at school; these statements were followed by open-ended questions for the students to discuss:

1. “I feel as though I have close friends here at school.”
2. “I feel like I’m regularly included in activities with my peers that are not class related.”

Difficulties. The researcher followed up the first statement with this question: “What has it been like making friends here at Kem?” Five of the seven participants stated that it has been difficult to make friends. Participant 2 stated, “Because of my disability, it’s not easy. I’m very impulsive and, and I sometimes say dumb things or do

dumb things and it's just, it's just not easy." Participant 4 stated, "For me, it's been very hard. Um, because I just felt like an outsider. Like, not included in a lot of things, just being honest." Participant 6 stated, "I do have a few people that I feel like I rely on and especially helps when people approach me first."

Support. The researcher followed up the second statement with this question: "How do you feel like your friends or your peers support you, care for you, and listen to you?" Four participants directly answered the question. One responded that yes, they did feel supported by friends at school; one participant said no; and two did not address the question. When asked, "Do you guys ever reach out and try to invite other students to join in on activities?" Participant 4 said, "Yes, I do, like, in the female dorm, I've gone on walks with them and I try to bond with more first and second years than I do third years. So it's nice to be able to bond with them when you have the chance." Participant 6 added,

Uh, last year I started a club. To which I probably threw more of myself into than I needed to. But it's going, uh but so far it's going pretty strong and I'm in the process of trying to set it up to keep going after I leave. And, um, when you mentioned inviting people in, that's almost one of my go to reasons.

Participant 6 also later added about the club, "I find it quite fun and I actually kind of enjoyed the fact that it seems that a number of students that normally wouldn't hang out together get to do so."

Hardships. The researcher posed the following questions:

1. "Has there ever been a time when you felt like you did not belong on campus?"
2. "Have things changed over the years while you have been at Kem?"

Six of the seven participants stated that yes, there have been times when they did not feel like they belonged at Kem. So how did they get through these times?

Time. Of the six participants who admitted feeling as though they did not belong at times, five attributed getting through it to simply giving it time. Participant 2 stated, “When I was in my first year it was hard, but I got used to it as time went on.”

Participant 6 stated, “So uh first year was definitely felt quite- uh quite suffocating. Second, second year was definitely better. But still confining. Third year, despite the vast increase in responsibilities, I feel far more comfortable trying to, um, grapple personal responsibilities.” Participant 5 said, “Well, yes, like since first and second year, it was crazy. But there’s different places that can be crazy. But it was worth it. I can’t control the people. Like, I can’t move schools because I chose this school.”

Support. Of the six participants who felt as though they did not belong at times, they all noted some of this being remedied by their parents and staff supporting them. Participant 1 and 3 told the researcher that they call or text their parents when they get lonely or are having a bad day. Participant 4 talked about being excited when their parents pointed out the strides they were making. Participant 5 stated, “I can always talk to my staff and pray to God that things will be better.” Likewise, Participant 6 singled out a staff member who had been very helpful through the three years at Kem:

The staff, the staff was definitely [helpful]. Well I mean, there’s a few select staff that I go to, uh, go to on a regular basis, and, um, a few others here and not no longer here that I’m hoping to keep in contact with.

The students noted that, even outside of class activities, their staff had their best interests in mind.

Staff support. Unanimously, all seven participants agreed they had felt supported by the staff working at Kem College during their attendance, both inside and outside of the classroom. The students mentioned ways in which the academic and student life staff came alongside them on a regular basis to both assist and encourage. During the focus groups, the researcher posed the following questions related to staff-student engagement:

1. “How do your teachers work with you in class to make you feel comfortable and make you feel included?”
2. “How do staff members help you to be a better student?”

In class. At Kem, staff members fit into three key roles in the academic sphere: instructors, advisors, and paraprofessionals. Instructors’ primary role is to teach the courses students take. Paraprofessionals work in the classroom alongside the instructors, aiding and assisting during lessons. The advisors serve as liaisons between students, parents, and staff, making sure they are all working together to further the students’ growth toward appropriate independence. Six of the seven participants discussed how the individuals in these three roles have impacted their time at Kem College. Participant 4 stated:

My advisor gives me tools. . . . she helps me in the worst cases. But she understood like hey, this is how I can help, and she like, gave me tips and stuff to help me through the year. And we have a binder that I use, and she helped me to have that for sure. And I use it on a daily basis it’s just how I can like regulate my feelings, if I need to. If I had a like a different advisor, I don’t think I would

really be where I was. Which she's very open and honest with me, and I'm open and honest with her, which is nice.

Likewise, Participant 6 stated, "I go to her [advisor] whenever I'm feeling overwhelmed."

Other participants had similar things to say about their instructors. Participant 2 said, "They teach me things. And they try to help me reach my goal. One of my goals is to be able to be on my own someday." Participant 5 shared that working with the staff at Kem has been both easy and hard: "Like for easy, I talk to my teachers whenever I am having a hard time, and it's hard that, for me that, I was a little nervous at first and I didn't want to talk about stuff." Participant 4 also talked about the transition to Kem and working with her instructors:

Yeah, I was always pulled out of class [in high school] and like they went slower around us, and I strive in this school because of it, because like high school, they went way too fast for me, and I didn't learn anything. For this year, I'm able to learn and grasp things.

When asked, "Are you glad you came to Kem?" Participant 1 stated, "Yes, because they, because they're helping me. They're helping me to be a better student and helping me."

Out of class. Just as the staff helped the participants inside of the classroom, the participants had much to say about the support they receive outside of the classroom from student life staff who work with the students after the school day is finished. Participant 6 talked about how, when she wanted to talk about spiritual matters, a student life staff member helped her out and was able to answer her questions. Similarly, Participant 1 shared how these staff members remind students about what they are learning in class and

help them practice it outside of the classroom walls, such as using an “I message.” The students also joyfully talked about clubs at school. Participant 4 stated, “They encourage us to form clubs. They’re very high on that part.” Participant 6 agreed, “Yes they help us start them [clubs], but they certainly, they certainly don’t, don’t try and do it all for you.” Altogether, when the researcher asked the participants, “Do you feel supported personally by the staff members? Do you feel like they care about you?” there was a resounding “Yes.”

Staff Themes

Table 2

Major Themes and Sub-Themes for Staff

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Supporting Students in Academics</u>	<u>Supporting Students out of the Classroom</u>	<u>Consistency</u>	<u>Growth</u>
Sub-Theme	Curriculum Intentionality	Meeting them where they are Intentionality		

“For some of them [students] for the first time in their lives, they can develop a genuine friendship with somebody who’s on their level” (Participant 9). “In high school, they’ve been the ostracized ones. So, this is the first time that they really had the opportunity to have close friendships” (Participant 17). The staff at Kem College recognize the hardships that the students have overcome to get to this point in their education. Below, the data presented by the staff participants is explored as it related to supporting students in and out of the classroom, addressing the overarching question, “How do you help to create a sense of belonging for students at Kem College?”

Supporting students in academics. At Kem College, the staff members who primarily work in the academic sphere with the students are the instructors, advisors, and paraprofessionals. Their role is to teach transferable skills that can be used outside of the classroom and that equip the students to develop independence. Of the 16 staff participants, 10 were members of the academic team. Below is a description of the curriculum as well as staff members responses to the following questions:

1. In what ways does your position in academics contribute to a student feeling like they have close friends?
2. In what ways does your position contribute to students feeling comfortable talking about personal matters (i.e., hygiene, finances, relationships) with staff members?
3. In what ways does your position contribute to students feeling comfortable contributing to classroom discussions and work?

Curriculum. The curriculum at Kem College was designed with a great deal of intentionality, organized around core courses that are supplemented by courses related to the students' program of choice: horticulture, culinary, or technology. The five main categories that they focus on in their courses are mobility skills, spiritual life, daily living skills, social/emotional skills, and functional academic skills in the areas of language arts, math, money skills, computer skills, and career skills. Participant 19 explained that the core structure stays the same through the years but the way they teach it has variety. The following are thoughts and comments expressed by the staff members regarding academics at Kem College.

Participant 19, an instructor, stated,

They do a unit on relationships and, um, it's all about friendships about friendship building, um, and conflict resolution. And, um, it's, yeah, it's how to navigate friendships more like as they as they enter college, "Who is my friends and who is not my friends," yeah, how to start conversations.

Participant 20, a paraprofessional, agreed, stating, "A good part of the first-year curriculum is teaching them how to makes friends." Participant 16, also an instructor, stated, "The academic curriculum addresses hygiene and finances, relationships, and so I think that helps foster a common language among students." Participant 23, a paraprofessional, added to the conversation: "How to initiate a conversation, conflict resolution, those things they learned the first year are huge for when they come back the next year. That's really the foundation I believe, of why it's successful."

Intentionality. All 10 academic staff members spoke about the intentionality that they use or see used by their colleagues when working with their current students in academics. Participant 16 talked about teaching in a variety of modes to help students understand what they are learning, like giving opportunities for verbal responses, writing things down, using Chromebooks, or drawing pictures. Participant 8, an advisor, also spoke to the intentionality she uses with each student to meet their individual needs:

I feel that, um, with the students in the cases with autism, it helps to go through like a leisure activity list with them and help them build that list throughout the semester to encourage them to just be involved in those wonderful things that Kem offers.

Participant 11, another advisor, added,

I work with them more on how to build friendships like behind the scenes, and then they take the skills to play it out more so in student life so just role playing, creating ideas coming up with sometimes the most ridiculous tools works best. Echoing Participant 11, Participant 18 mentioned trying to communicate as clearly as possible with students and, if they do not understand, taking the time to use different words or frame it differently until the students are able to make a connection.

Supporting students out of the classroom. At Kem College, the student life staff members work with the students during mornings and evenings as well as over the weekends. Many of these staff members live with the students and have the responsibility of helping the students develop daily living skills and progressing toward appropriate independence. Of the 16 staff participants, 6 were members of the student life staff. Each student life staff member had their own opinion, but common among all responses was their intentional focus with students and meeting students where they are.

Meeting them where they are. The student life staff have a unique opportunity not present with the academic staff; they get to do life with the students outside of the classroom. They get to eat with them, hang out on the weekends, go out into the community and even sleep in their same building. This unique opportunity affords them the ability to meet students on their level and be present even in some of the mundane activities. Participant 13 talked about how all the students have to eat, so what better place to engage in conversations than around the dinner table:

Everyone was silent and so we had to like pull out conversation cards and have them, um, start asking each other questions and then coming up with their own questions. . . . we were helping them to see the value in it.

Participant 14 also added that another thing that helps students feel like they belong is by being willing to talk to them openly and honestly and making them feel comfortable.

Participant 18, who has worked in both student life and academic life over the years, added,

A lot of times as well we give them a lot of activities and opportunities to practice those sort of friendship skills, have conversations and that sort of thing. A lot of times, you know, if we see two students have a lot of shared interests, you know, we might, you know, try and invite them into conversation, you know, if like, will initiate a conversation with one student and try and invite another student into that conversation and sort of facilitate that sort of thing that they might not come to do comfortably naturally themselves.

Over the three years students are at Kem, the staff members can continue to build on the relationships they have with the students. They regularly try to be examples for the students as well as encouraging them to practice the skills they have been learning.

Intentionality. Just as the academic life staff focused on the idea of intentionality in the work that they do, this was also present among comments made by all the student life staff. Participant 10 gave an example with one student in particular:

Well, like we do a lot of um we do a lot of strategic things. Like we try to initiate people hanging out together, especially with the, with our students with autism, because a lot of times they may want friends, but they have a hard time maybe initiating that. There was a first-year guy, and he was having such a hard time like trying to figure out things or topics to talk about, so we talked about social profiles. These are things I know this other person like so when they come over,

um, or when I engage with them, these are good things to we can talk about, like he will study it and memorize it. And then it's a really interesting way to have a friendship, but it works for him. It is what he needs. So I think that's super cool that, that he builds friendship portfolios, it's kind of neat.

Participant 12 also talked about a strategy he uses with the students he works with. This strategy is to walk side by side with the students when a conflict arises so that they can make an immediate connection about the best way to handle further conversations and conflicts that arise. Participant 18 added another example:

We also try to be very proactive at social mapping unexpected behaviors. So you know, students having an unexpected behaviors that's making other people uncomfortable, we try very hard to help the student to recognize that, you know, “If this unexpected behavior is causing this to happen, and making you feel unpleasant because you're pushing everyone away, you're not making any friends.” How can we change this behavior to expected?

The level of intentionality present and displayed by the staff members reveals a devotion to helping their students develop a sense of belonging at Kem College.

Consistency. Another theme discussed among the staff members at Kem was their dedication to consistency. This involves providing a consistent curriculum, consistent staff members, consistent rules, consistent tools, and consistent care. Of the 16 staff participants, 10 commented on the importance of providing a consistent language both in and out of the classroom for the student. Participant 20 stated it in this way: “Everything that the first years know they are learning, the third years know by nature.” Participant 8 added that he appreciates the consistency that all staff members use when

applying the tools that the students are learning, especially because it helps the students to gain confidence and comfort in these tools. Participant 10 agreed and added,

The Student life is the practical application of all that they are learning in the classroom. If you look around, we have all the social tools which are taught in the classroom that we reinforce. Like walking them through “I messages” or their circle of control. Or whatever it needs to be. We are constantly reinforcing what's going on in the classroom.

Growth. Through intentionality in practice and consistency in content, Kem staff members work to create an environment in which the students can develop and grow over time. Of the 16 staff participants, 11 discussed the growth they see in the students from their first year through to their third year. Sometimes, it takes some nudging or probing, but, in the end, growth is occurring, and many are even learning more about themselves. Often, it is a slow growth, as noted by Participants 19 and 9, but Participant 13 put it well:

As they learn more about who they are individually, I think they find their place in the community. They find their skills and their majors and fall into that and find their purpose in that. I think that helps them find their place in their community too.

The students grow in their understanding of themselves, but they also grow in their friendships, expanding their social networks. Participants 8, 9, 10, 11, and 13 all mentioned the growth they see in the friendships between and among students. Regardless of cliques, the students can engage with each other in meaningful ways because of the time they have spent together.

Conclusion

From the information gathered through the four focus groups conducted with 23 participants, the themes focused on how a sense of belonging affects students' experiences while also highlighting ways institutions can create a sense of belonging. Altogether, the conversations with the student participants produced the following themes: the role of friendships, the influence of hardships, and the impact of staff support. Through conversations with the staff participants, other themes surfaced: how to support students in the academics, ways to support out of the classroom, the importance of consistency, and highlighting the growth that occurs. Together, these themes highlighted how creating a sense of belonging affects a student's experience in higher education and outlined ways institutions can work to create a sense of belonging for their students with autism spectrum disorder. The implications of these findings on sense of belonging, as well as the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research, are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Implications

Many findings from the current study offer implications for academic institutions to use as they support and create a sense of belonging for their students with autism spectrum disorder. The current study examined how a small institution located in the Midwest, dedicated to serving students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, strives to create a sense of belonging with their students, in particular students with ASD. The researcher interviewed both current students and staff members in separate focus groups in order to gain a holistic understanding of the case. While institutional type impacts the nature of some of these implications, all higher education institutions still may wish to consider the following observations.

Supporting students. Feeling as though one belongs often comes with feeling supported. Goodenow (1993) defined belonging as “a sense of belonging or psychological membership in the school or classroom is the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (p. 80). At Kem College, all seven student participants said they felt supported by the staff members, and six students said they felt as though they belonged at Kem. On multiple occasions, the student participants spoke about the care they had experienced during their time at Kem. Many discussed how the staff members were there

for them when they had questions or needed guidance, in addition to showing them respect and making them feel included. For many student participants, at Kem College, this was the first time in their life when they did not feel ostracized or like the odd one out. Instead, they had the opportunity to relate and engage with other students on their same level both educationally and socially, contributing to their sense of belonging. This, in turn, could add to combating some of the negative outcomes recognized in those who do not feel as though they belong, such as harm to their well-being, intelligence, self-control, and even immune function and physical health (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

The student participants validated what the research has pointed out: students with ASD recognize when they are not being included (Sebastian et al., 2009). Five of the seven student participants at Kem College mentioned that they had experienced feeling left out or had struggled to fit in at some point during their college experience. This, however, does not negate the support that had been shown. In fact, it validates the importance of being supported. Each of the student participants persevered and stayed enrolled even amid struggle, in large part because of the support they received.

Consistency. At Kem College, the support does not stop at the classroom door but instead extends into the community in which students live and work. Osterman (2000) noted that many times students feel included and supported in academia but not outside the classroom. In this research study, staff members who work both inside the classroom as well as outside maintained a consistent language as they talked about how they support students. In particular, 10 of the 16 staff members made comments about the importance of a consistent language in supporting the students. However, the language used at Kem is only one aspect that has influenced the students.

Consistency also occurs in the curriculum, staff members, rules, tools, and care. Both the student and staff participants acknowledged that the consistency over the three years at Kem leads to both growth and a sense of belonging. As the students learn from their instructors and advisors, they also learn that those same individuals are consistent resources in their life. The students thereby develop a sense of trust for the staff members and seek guidance from them, as mentioned by four student participants.

Eleven of the sixteen staff participants alluded to the growth that occurs over the three years as a result of consistency. Sometimes, the growth is slow, and students need nudging along the way, but, by the end, many of them do not want to leave Kem when they graduate. Staff members mentioned that, by the third year, it is hard to even recognize some of the students in comparison to when they first arrived. They grow intellectually, socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

Consistency exists to bring about a repeatable outcome at Kem College, built on regularity and dependability. With consistency comes a way to replicate success among the masses. Consistency exists successfully at Kem College when it is held in high regard alongside intentionality. Intentionality exists when staff members go the extra mile and provide care within their work.

Intentionality. As much as the staff members are consistent with their students, they are also intentional. Each lesson in the curriculum has a great deal of intentionality in it. The way the staff members engage with the students is also intentional. Due to the nature of autism spectrum disorder, every person is unique, expressing a variety of characteristics such as social-communication deficits, repetitive patterns, and sensory sensitivities, at varying degrees (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The staff

members, both student life and academic staff, take great pride in meeting students where they are. The staff come up with unique ways to serve individual students, provide reasonable accommodations, and reframe instructions to ensure all students understand.

Kem College has also intentionally chosen to keep their student body small in an effort to maintain a low staff-to-student ratio. This ratio is not due to resources, such as facilities or money, but because of the increased attention and effort that can be given to students. Kem's mission is to train and educate students with disabilities (developmental and intellectual) by equipping them to gain independence through social, vocational, and personal skills, all while maintaining a focus on God's plan for their lives. In the twelve years they have been serving students, they have worked hard to accomplish this mission.

Even as they are intentional in their interactions with students, they are also intentional in their inactions. Each year, staff members evaluate where students are and pull back on the level of hands-on support they are providing. In year one, students live in the campus's main building that houses some classrooms and the cafeteria. In the second year, students move across the street to a different building where they experience greater freedom as staff members become more hands off. Finally, in the third year, students stay on campus but move to an apartment where they only live with their peers and no staff members. By this point, they are held responsible for grocery shopping, preparing meals, and completing an internship. Each year at Kem, the students gain more independence and responsibilities in an effort to set them up for success.

Individuals with ASD are part of a stigmatized, marginalized demographic that can struggle to fit in with the majority population. Higher education institutions need to take seriously the responsibility of ensuring that all students, particularly those with

intellectual disabilities, are given the same opportunities in creating a sense of belonging. This often means a higher level of intentionality at an institutional level to incorporate those who may struggle to engage in the same ways as their neurotypical peers. Also, institutions should have a consistent staff who work with their stigmatized population and who can develop a consistent relationship with the students with ASD. Getting to know each student for who they are individually sets these students up for greater success and, in turn, sets up the institution as a whole up for greater success. When students feel as though they belong and matter, the institution as a whole produces higher retention rates, institutional loyalty, and students who are motivated to learn (Schlossberg, 1989).

Limitations of this Study

Case studies are used to gain an in-depth understanding of a particular individual, group, or, in this case, single institution. Therefore, using a case study inherently entails some limitations within the research. The research gathered only reflects how one school is working with their students with autism spectrum disorder and does not offer variety in institutional type. Participants in the study were individuals who worked or attended Kem College during the 2019-2020 school year, bringing additional limitations because of the non-longitudinal nature of the study.

With data gathered from focus groups participants, self-reporting and group sway further limited the study. The researcher spent little time observing the students or staff members in their daily activities and jobs, relying totally on the participants' descriptions of their experience. Due to the sensitive nature of the diagnosis, the researcher was limited to the number of participants willing to participate. One participant dropped out of the study while the focus group was in session, narrowing the scope of study. Lastly,

because of the necessary travel for the researcher to be present physically at the school, all of the focus groups had to take place within one day during a limited time period. This limited the number of participants and which participants were able to contribute.

One final limitation to be considered is researcher bias. The researcher has spent a few years working with individuals with autism spectrum disorder, allowing this experience to influence the chosen topic. Additionally, considering the qualitative nature of the study, the results could suffer from confirmation bias.

Suggestions for Future Research

Taking into consideration the current study's findings as well as limitations, multiple opportunities exist for further research on the topic. Further studies could compare this case study to other institutions that serve students with autism spectrum disorder, in particular how non-faith-based institutions as well as larger institutions engage with their students. The comparative study would provide greater insight into the current study's findings as well as reveal additional facets that can be used to create a sense of belonging for students with autism spectrum disorder.

Similarly, using a longitudinal study to compare the students' experiences over their three years at Kem College would add another dimension and insight into the students' experiences. Finally, interviewing staff members at the beginning of their tenure at Kem College and then in subsequent years would provide longitudinal insight into how the staff members' perspectives change over time.

Benefits of this Study

The anticipated benefit of the current study was to bridge the gap in the literature regarding the way higher education institutions should practically help students with

ASD feel as though they belong in their chosen academic institution. The current literature points out how important a sense of belonging is to the success of students both academically and socially but falls short in identifying the best method to accomplish this objective. This study sought to benefit multiple higher education institutions in developing an approach that effectively helps individuals with ASD to belong. Through the research design and participation selection process as well as the data collection and analysis process, the hope was to unearth meaningful insights that affect the future of higher education.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to add a depth of understanding of practical approaches that can be used in higher education institutions to create a sense of belonging for students with autism spectrum disorder. Even though Kem College maintains a small enrollment of 85 students, they outline some guiding principles that can be used by other institutions. Kem is able to model effective methods for supporting students largely through consistency and intentionality. Being present with the students during these refining years of growth and self-discovery sets them up to develop appropriate independence and confidence to reach their goals.

While Kem College employs a number of practices for working with students with ASD, no school is a perfect model. Kem does a good job of recognizing students' needs and especially balancing their need for independence, fostering a community where students experience a sense of belonging. In accordance with their mission statement, Kem accomplishes this while seeking to be more than a school focused on academics but a "safe-haven" where students can develop healthy social and spiritual lives.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Questions for Staff

1. What is your position here at Kem?
2. How long have you worked here?
3. How much time do you spend in a typical day interacting directly with students as a result of your position?
4. In your role, how do you help to create a sense of belonging for students?
5. What does Kem do well on in maintaining a sense of belonging for its students? Why are why not? What could it improve upon?
6. We asked the students the following statements and provided them the opportunity to elaborate with some follow up questions. I want to hear your opinion on how you think the students would have answered and how your position engages with this statement.
 - a. “I feel as though I have close friends here at school”?
 - i. In what ways does your position contribute to a student feeling this way?
 - ii. In what way could your position contribute to a student feeling this way?
 - b. “I am comfortable talking about personal matters (hygiene, finances, relationships) with my peers and the staff”
 - i. In what ways does your position contribute to a student feeling this way?
 - ii. In what way could your position contribute to a student feeling this way?
 - c. “I am comfortable contributing to classroom discussions and work”?
 - i. In what ways does your position contribute to a student feeling this way?
 - ii. In what way could your position contribute to a student feeling this way?
 - d. “I enjoy being with my peers”?
 - i. In what ways does your position contribute to a student feeling this way?
 - ii. In what way could your position contribute to a student feeling this way?
 - e. “I feel like I am regularly included in activities with my peers that are not class related”
 - i. In what ways does your position contribute to a student feeling this way?
 - ii. In what way could your position contribute to a student feeling this way?

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions for Students

1. Are you a first, second, or third year student?
2. Which program are you a part of: culinary, horticulture, or technology?
3. To what extent would you agree with this phrase – “I feel as though I have close friends here at school”?
 - a. Has it been difficult to make friends? Why or why not?
 - b. Do you believe it is important to make friends?
4. To what extent would you agree with this phrase – “I am comfortable talking about personal matters with my peers and the staff”?
 - a. How has this changed since coming to Kem?
 - b. How do you feel supported personally by staff members?
 - c. Has there been a time where you did not feel supported by staff members?
 - d. How do you feel supported personally by your peers?
5. To what extent would you agree with this phrase – “I am comfortable contributing to classroom discussions and work”?
 - a. How has this changed since coming to Kem?
 - b. How do your professors/teachers work with you in class?
 - c. Are there any aspects of class that make you uncomfortable?
6. To what extent would you agree with this phrase – “I enjoy being with my peers”?
 - a. Tell me more about that.
 - b. What do you enjoy about being with your peers?
 - c. When do you most enjoying hanging out with your peers? In class? Out of class?
7. To what extent would you agree with this phrase, “I feel like I am regularly included in activities with my peers that are not class related”?
 - a. What activities stand out to you?
 - b. Do you begin activities with your peers?
 - c. Tell me more about these activities.
8. Has there ever been a time when you felt like you did not belong on campus? Explain your answer.
9. In general, do you feel like you belong here at Kem College? Explain why or why not.

