



**Lesley**  
UNIVERSITY

## Autism Connection at Lesley University Justification Document Table of Contents

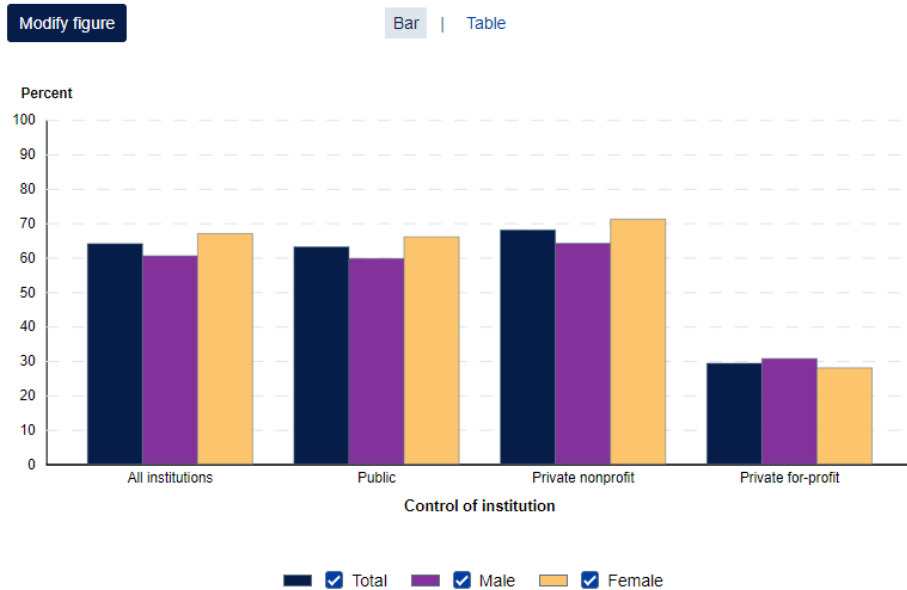
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## Part I. Low College Completion Rates: Its Effects on Students and Institutional Longevity

At its simplest, the deliverable of a college degree is a check that can be cashed. “Over a lifetime, the earnings of an associate’s degree recipient are roughly \$170,000 higher than those of a high school graduate, while the earnings of a bachelor’s degree holder are \$570,000 more than those of a high school graduate.” (Greenstone et al., 2016, 16) In a country that does not have universal healthcare like the United States, that difference in earnings does not just represent a difference in financial health but has tangible impact on physical and mental health as well. Thomas G. Mortensen of the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education has declared that, “...now virtually the only path to the middle class runs through higher education” (Fischer, 2019).

Yet the path to the middle class is a difficult one, even within colleges and universities. College enrollment is not college completion. 40% of college students drop out (Strauss, 2022). There is variation in the college completion rate by type of institution, but in no type of institution does the completion rate crack 70%. In many post-secondary education institutions, the minimum for a passing grade is 70%. Even increasing the timetable to 150% time for degree completion, widening the threshold for six years to obtain a Bachelor’s degree, does not achieve a “C” grade, as evidenced by the cohort study by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) below.

Figure 3. Graduation rate within 150 percent of normal time (within 6 years) for degree completion from first institution attended for first-time, full-time bachelor's degree-seeking students at 4-year postsecondary institutions, by control of institution and sex: Cohort entry year 2014



To make matters worse, not graduating from college means more than not getting a degree. It means that the higher-salaried, sometimes benefits-providing jobs that require a postsecondary credential are inaccessible—yet student loans still need to be paid off. In 2022, President Joseph Biden announced a one-time student loan forgiveness program, but it was quickly frozen by federal courts. As for student loan pauses enacted during the pandemic, to give graduates—and non-graduates—more time to pay before interest resumed accruing in response to the devastation that the pandemic inflicted on the United States economy, on February 17, 2023, a bill was filed to end that grace period (Minsky, 2023). Regardless of either of these programs’ end results, it is safe to say that borrowers should not expect for loans to be waived or even reduced in response to being unable to complete their degree programs. The result is that “[d]ropouts are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as college grads, and they are four times more likely to default on student loans, thus wrecking their credit and shrinking their career options” (Strauss, 2022). In other words, going to college but not graduating is often worse than not having gone to college at all.

How does the low college completion rate impact students with disabilities? Beyond the lived experience of students with disabilities in college, characterized by even disabled students with up-to-date paperwork, an expensive and time-consuming process that theoretically grants equal access to opportunities, having to endure low expectations by faculty and peers (Saia, 2022, 18), nonconsensual use as inspirational material (Saia, 2022, 21), and shock at their very presence (Saia, 2022, 21), there is also the issue of the perception of who is “college-material.” Harvard Graduate School of Education researchers Mandy Savitz-Romer and Suzanne M. Bouffard tell the story of Kamilah:

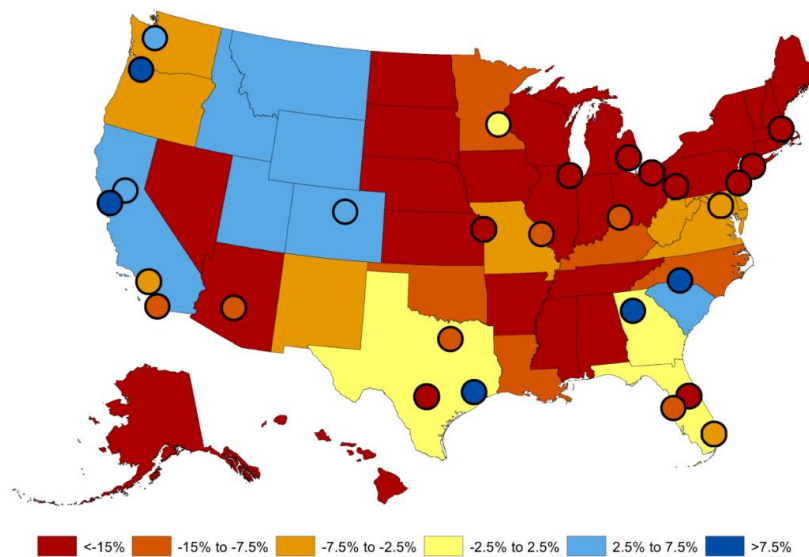
...Kamilah... assumed that her enrollment in a special education program meant that she couldn't go to college. This was partially shaped by the fact that she heard adults say derogatory things about students in special education that suggested it was impossible for them to get into or succeed in college.

Unfortunately, Kamilah's beliefs about what “special ed kids” (as she referred to herself)... led her to foreclose on college. (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012, 77)

It is *imperative* to understand that no trait is inherently “college material” or not “college material.” Especially given the diversity of the American postsecondary education landscape, there is no one formula for being a college student. Still, it is irresponsible to discount the power of the dominant narrative about disability told to people with and without disabilities alike, that disability is a legal entity or medical misfortune to be managed, rather than a legitimate part of a person's identity to be honored (Saia, 2022, 19), in both shaping our students' understanding of themselves and their capabilities and the beliefs held about them by friends, family, staff, faculty, employers, and more. All this combined, plus more factors, like physical inaccessibility of campus and the price of college and having a disability, contributes to the Bachelor's-degree-or-

more gap of 23.1% between Americans with disabilities, 16.1%, and Americans without disabilities, 39.2% (National Institute on Disability, 2020).

The low college completion rate does not jeopardize students' futures but the futures of institutions as well. Demographic changes are coming to the United States. Financial insecurity, from crises like the 2008 global stock market crash and the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, have prompted a smaller birth rate. With fewer people being born, fewer people are graduating high school and deciding to go to college. The end result is that, between 2025 and 2029, there is a 15% drop in the college-going population across the United States projected (Barshay, 2018). The drop is projected to be even larger in some regions of the country, including the Boston metropolitan area and the Northeast more broadly.



As an institution based in the Northeast, pulling much of its population from high schools, and in an area with many other colleges, including the Ivy League Harvard University and its many graduate schools, Lesley University is not immune to these changes. In fact, it needs to be even more vigilant about ways to survive the approaching demographic storm. With

fewer students “on the market,” each individual student has more “buying power.” What do students value? Considering the dire consequences of not obtaining a degree, institutions with the highest graduation rates will be in the best position to prove their worth. If the higher education sector fails to prove their value, given the current anti-higher-ed zeitgeist, companies and employers may continue to offer their own educational services and may even change hiring requirements.

## Part II. The Centrality of Sense of Belonging

Why do students drop out of college? There are of course financial reasons, but this program is focused on a far more insidious reason that cannot be tracked through tax filings or bank balances: not feeling like you belong.

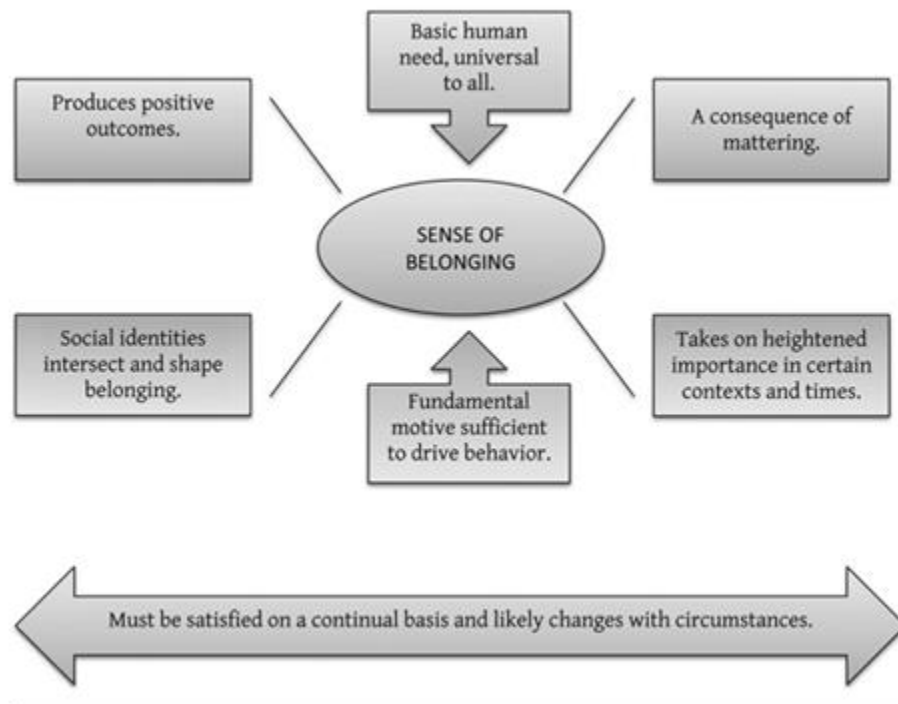


Figure 4.1 Core elements of belonging theory

The transition from high school to college is difficult for all students, but especially students with disabilities. On top of woes about communal living, worry about classes, and the

potential for students to be far from home—perhaps for the first time, no less—Lesley University cannot provide the supports that some students had in their IEPs or 504 plans. Even for students who did not have difficulty with academics in high school, the complexity of topics covered in a college classroom while needing to balance the demands of independent living is enough to frustrate, confuse, or even overwhelm even the straight-As honor student.

### Part III. The Importance of Relationships

The good news is that disequilibrium when coming to college is a universal experience, although the intensity of that disequilibrium varies from student to student. The classroom, then, can be a pool of commiseration about the shift and brainstorming about solutions. But Autistic students/students with autism can struggle to understand the “social script” to create and maintain the relationships that can buoy a college career. Relationships are not just important for students who are struggling. Psychologist Erik Erikson, the creator of the psychosocial stages of development, summates, “...engaging successfully in the process of identity formation — coming to understand ‘who I am’ *in the context of relationships with others* [emphasis added] — promotes self-confidence, facilitates decision-making, and provides the foundation for fulfilling interpersonal relationships” (Erikson, 1968).

Relationships are also crucial for students’ post-college careers. Economists Sandy Baum and Michael McPherson explain: “Even if everyone left college with the same skills and credentials, they would not fare equally well in a labor market characterized by gender and racial discrimination, an outsized role for social connections and financial advantages, and numerous other factors that are far from the ideal of perfect competition” (Baum & McPherson, 2022, 13). In other words, a college degree may be the ticket to the labor market fair, but it is not a ticket for the job-ride.

Dr. Ned Laff, an academic advising reformer, argues that students need to be engaged in dialogue about their goals and reasonings for their decisions (Carlson, 2020). Autistic students may need more explicit prompting to discover their goals and reasonings than their neurotypical peers. Even when Autistic students know what they want to do, the route to get there is opaque, even for neurotypical students. Just like a university website that is not up-to-date, the job market has techniques that are not immediately apparent—like emailing a local political candidate about ways one can help their campaign, even though the campaign website does not indicate that they are taking interns (Carlson, 2020). This is the “hidden job market”: that invisible way to gain social connections that play “an outsized role.” While Autistic students are hardly the only group to struggle with the hidden job market—the campaign example is from a low-income, first-generation student of color who only sent the email at Advisor Laff’s request—they are a demographic that is under the purview of the LD/ADD Academic Support Program, and for Autistic students, it is not just the job market that is “hidden” but the social scene as well.

#### Part IV. Autism Connection Methodology

The methodology of Autism Connection is grounded in the social constructivist tradition: the viewing of knowledge that is co-created among a community of learners. Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist, famously characterized learning as “... more than the acquisition of the ability to think; it is the acquisition of many specialized abilities for thinking about a variety of things” (Vygotsky, 1978, 83). Vygotsky is most well-known for his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development: the idea that people have a range between what they can currently do and what they can do with help from instructor guidance or through working with more skilled and/or experienced peers (Vygotsky, 1978, 86). The best instruction, then, is aimed a little bit above a person’s skill level. Autism Connection puts Autistic Lesley students in community with



each other—peers of various skill levels and experiences with college and the world at large—as well as a facilitator with lived experience being an Autistic college student. Through this community, struggling individuals can recognize patterns of difficulty, minimizing the feeling of isolation inherent in seeming to have a unique trouble, as well as procedures that have helped people who share a salient identity.

Autism Connection is also based on the Learning Partnership Model. The learning partnership model acts on the assumptions that knowledge is created through our interactions with the world, our identities shape those interactions and thus our knowledge, and that knowledge is mutually constructed (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, 37). Its three principles are: “validating students’ capacity to know, situating learning in students’ experiences, and defining learning as mutually constructing meaning” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, 37). As such, the learning partnership model dismantles the hierarchical relationships between student and instructor that characterize the education system. In validating students as inherently knowledgeable, Autistic students have the experience of being the experts on something: a situation that may very well be new to some, especially those that grew up in the deficit-framing “special education” system, which sees neurodivergent and/or disabled learners as needing to “catch up” to neurotypical learners. In situating learning in students’ experiences, patterns in experience can be highlighted and open conversations about systemic inequity, rather than individual shortcomings. In defining learning as mutually constructing meaning, *each* learner becomes a valuable source of knowledge.

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