

## BUILDING SENSE OF BELONGING THROUGH UNDERGRADUATE CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE

Megan Friesen, Aims Community College

*The purpose of this case study was to understand how attending an undergraduate academic conference contributes to a student's sense of belonging, not only within their institution but also in the larger academic community. This research was informed by the literature on club participation in conferences and faculty/student connections. Through in-depth interviews with three community college students and observational data collected throughout a four-day conference, their engagement with each other and with students from other colleges was explored. The findings include the faculty's role as a catalyst for student involvement, the growth of within-group dynamics, increased student appreciation for their college, and increased involvement of students in the academic community.*

Every spring, I agonize over the mounds of paperwork required to bring students to an undergraduate academic conference. Colleagues often ask me why I go through the headache to make this happen, and I've struggled to find an easy answer. Instead, I can reflect on the students who befriended their colleagues from a four-year school and planned a round table together for the next year. Or I think about the joy on a student's face when she won a writing award. Sometimes I laugh remembering a student commenting that the session he attended was fine but "all they did was read their papers." Yes, that's what we do at conferences. Sometimes I grimace at the challenges of travel, like the time we sat together in an emergency room after a car accident. How can I capture these memories and the students' sense of belonging that stems from them?

The purpose of this research was to understand how attending an undergraduate academic conference, specifically the Sigma Kappa Delta/Sigma Tau Delta (SKD/STD) conference, contributes to a student's sense of belonging. The SKD/STD conference is somewhat unique in that it brings together English majors from both community colleges and four-year colleges/universities. SKD is the English honor society for community colleges, and STD is the English honor society for four-year colleges and universities. To make conference attendance affordable, the institution pays for all aspects of the students' travel. Most of the community college students who attended this conference plan to later enroll at a four-year college or university after they earn their associate degree; although, many of them do not plan to pursue English after they transfer. For the purpose of this research, the students who participated in this study are from one community college and attended the 2023 SKD/STD conference.

The central research question of this study was: How does attending an academic conference contribute to a community college student's sense of belonging? In this research, I utilized Tinto's (2012) model of student retention and critical student development theory (Jones, 2019).

### RELEVANT LITERATURE

In this literature review, I define a sense of belonging and summarize the current research on student participation in clubs and conferences, including access to these opportunities for students with limited financial means, and the impact of faculty-student connection through extra-curricular activities. For the purpose of this research, the definition of sense of belonging comes from Strayhorn (2019), who defines this as "perceived social

support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community” (p. 4). This sense of belonging includes social and academic integration that a student experiences and that influences a student to remain in college (Tinto, 2012). Students experience social integration through membership in clubs and organizations as well as through the development of their social circle. Students develop academic integration through their coursework and relationships with faculty and staff (Tinto, 2012). Through this study, I expand on this definition through the research participants’ experiences.

Existing research on student engagement with clubs and conferences shows promising results for students’ sense of belonging and, therefore, their social and academic integration. Strayhorn’s (2019) research demonstrates a connection between student club participation and sense of belonging. This research found that the more involved students are with campus organizations, the greater their sense of belonging. This increased sense of belonging did not just come from student-student interactions but was also demonstrated in student-faculty interactions (Strayhorn, 2019). Specifically, Strayhorn (2019) identified four ways that club membership increases sense of belonging: shared interests and values, familiarity with the campus, a sense of membership, and feeling that they matter.

O’Connor et al.’s (2022) research also demonstrates the impact of club membership and conference travel. Their research focused on the Campus Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) students attending a CAMP conference. They found that students felt that their identities were reflected through conference presentations. Students also formed stronger bonds with other conference attendees, felt a greater sense of belonging at their college, and found a greater sense of belonging in their degree program. This study also found that students felt legitimized in their chosen field and experienced strengthened academic interests. This led to a greater interest in giving back to their college and larger communities. However, these effects were most prevalent when the student was supported by a group environment before and after the conference. Attending a conference as a one-off event, meaning there were no group activities before or after the conference, did not guarantee this impact (O’Connor et al., 2022).

Recognizing the financial burden yet benefits of student travel, Dean and Kelly’s (2020) research focused on providing travel opportunities to students who are less likely to be able to afford the out-of-pocket costs. They applied for and received institutional funding to take first-generation students on an educational trip. After travel, the students reported a stronger sense of identity and closer relationships with the other students and the faculty with whom they traveled (Dean & Kelly, 2020). This research demonstrates the positive outcomes that can occur when accessibility to these programs is increased through financial assistance. Whatley and Stich (2021) studied the inclusivity of study abroad programs, another travel opportunity that can have a high cost. They discovered that when financial assistance was available and advertised to students, cost was not the determining factor as to whether or not a student would participate (Whatley & Stich, 2021). Although there might be several reasons why a student chooses not to travel, addressing cost is the first step.

The impact travel has on student-faculty connection is also demonstrated through research by Kirby and Thomas (2022). Their research indicated that faculty who show students they care and connect with students create a greater sense of connection for those students. This does not just apply to their sense of connection with faculty, but also extends to their sense of connection with their peers (Kirby & Thomas, 2022).

The existing literature establishes the context for this study. Student sense of belonging was defined, and the impacts of club membership and travel, especially when made feasible for students less likely to afford to do so, were explored. This study seeks to better understand how faculty taking club members to an academic conference, with travel paid for by the institution, impacted the students’ sense of belonging.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach I used in this research is a case within a case study (Stake, 1995) utilizing Tinto’s (2012) model of student retention and critical student development theory (Jones, 2019) as its theoretical lens.

## Methodological Framework: Case Within a Case Study

This study is based on Stake's (1995) approach to case study research. He pulls from a variety of qualitative methodologies to ground case studies on issues, especially concerning education. In focusing on issues rather than problems, Stake (1995) argues that the researcher is a more neutral observer because the focus is not on what is problematic. As an observer, I was also able to engage more collaboratively with the research participants to draw assertions from both the interpretations I created and the ones the research participants created. Furthermore, because case study research occurs in a bounded system (Jones et al., 2014), I was able to deeply explore the case that I studied to more fully understand how academic conference attendance connects with a student's sense of belonging.

Each research participant demonstrated their own case within the larger case. The larger case was bounded in that it focused on students from one community college who attended the SKD/STD conference in the spring of 2023. This was a four-day conference that consisted of panel presentations of undergraduate research in literature and original creative writing. In addition to the creative writing and research panels, there are workshops for students to network with each other, keynote speakers, organized fun activities, and award presentations. Using Stake's (1995) case-within-case approach allowed me to deeply explore each individual case and then draw themes from those cases and the larger case.

## Theoretical Perspective: Student Retention and Critical Student Development Theory

Despite the motivations behind a student's decision to go to college, they might not achieve their educational goals. This can be especially true at public community colleges, where the national retention rate is 61% versus the 82% (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.) of public four-year colleges and universities. Tinto's (2012) model explores what influences a student's departure from their institution. He argues that students enter college with a variety of experiences and backgrounds, and they have at least some degree of commitment to their educational goals. Experiences in college can weaken or strengthen those commitments. This is not forgetting, though, that students also have a life outside of college. When a student's college integration (socially and academically) is weaker, those external forces might pull a student away from their education and toward other goals (Tinto, 2012). This research examined how conference attendance might impact a student's sense of belonging, which can be reflected through this idea of integration.

Student development theory (Jones, 2019) also examines how students create a sense of belonging throughout their educational journey. There have been several waves of student development theory, but the second and third waves are the most applicable to studying sense of belonging. The second wave of student development theory focused on the development of a student's social identity, sense of belonging, and understanding of the self (Jones, 2019). The third wave built on this by adding that students who develop in the ways established by the second wave can then move on to create social change (Jones, 2019); in other words, the third wave adds a critical approach to student development theory. Stewart and Brown's (2019) research reinforces this idea by showing that as students destabilize their existing identities and create new ones, they are positioned to dismantle oppressive systems.

## Participants

Five students from the community college of interest attended the 2023 SKD/STD conference in Denver, Colorado. I used purposeful sampling (Jones et al., 2014) by inviting all five students to participate. On the first day of the conference, I met with the group to explain my research and handed out informed consent forms. I instructed them to read the form carefully, reach out to me with any questions, and return the signed form to me by the end of the conference if they were interested in participating. Of the five students, three self-selected to participate. All three research participants are members of SKD. Membership in this honor society requires a 3.0 GPA, A's in English and literature classes, and at least 15 college-level credit hours earned. Their pseudonyms and demographic data are as follows.

**Nicole.** Nicole is a 29-year-old white woman who has attended college off and on. She began her studies in 2010 but stopped out to consider different career paths. She re-enrolled in 2020 to complete the prerequisites for the

radiology technician program, which she began full-time in the Fall 2023 semester.

**Renee.** Renee is a 37-year-old white woman who attended the community college full-time for two years. She is a member of a bridge program that connects community college students to a university. In the Spring 2023 semester, she began her studies in elementary education at the university.

**Rose.** Rose is a 23-year-old Hispanic woman who has attended the community college part-time for one year. She is also a member of the bridge program but has not yet begun university classes. She is an English major and plans to attend law school after earning her bachelor's degree in English.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

These data were collected through observational research as well as semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Jones et al., 2014; Stake, 1995). I attended the four-day conference with the participants and journaled my observations of the group and the conference at the end of each day. Although my initial observations focused on the entire group, only observations regarding the students who submitted their consent forms were used in this research. The research participants were encouraged to seek out presentations and sections of the conference that interested them, but there were several opportunities for us all to be together.

The week after the conference, I scheduled Zoom interview sessions with each participant. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and focused on questions I had prepared in advance as well as follow-up questions that arose from our conversations. I recorded the interviews on Zoom and immediately transcribed them using Otter AI. Afterward, I emailed each participant a copy of their transcript as well as some of my initial thoughts regarding the themes that emerged. This email exchange allowed me to also seek further clarification about anything brought up in the interview (Stake, 1995).

I analyzed these data using direct interpretation, which involved thinking deeply about the case and watching it closely (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). This direct interpretation was based on a search for patterns, which Stake (1995) defines as “consistency within certain conditions” (p. 78). By reflecting on my observations as well as the interview data, I identified codes and then established themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Trustworthiness**

The primary way I created trustworthiness for this study was through member checking (Stake, 1995). I shared the transcripts and initial findings with the research participants and invited their feedback. I also protected my participants' ability to decline participation by recruiting them privately for the study and not discussing the research in group meetings. The participants also signed a consent form, at which point they were reminded that they could remove themselves from the study at any time and that no one else in the group would know if they participated. They were invited to choose their preferred name or pseudonym (Lahman, 2018) to help protect their privacy. Furthermore, no participants were aware that I would be thanking them with an Amazon gift card until after the data collection was completed. Additionally, I compared my findings with other descriptions of the phenomenon to theoretically triangulate (Stake, 1995) my results, and gathering observational data along with interview data allowed me to use data source triangulation (Stake, 1995). Finally, I reflexively journaled (Jones et al., 2014) throughout the research process to record my thoughts, biases, and assumptions, which are also shared in this manuscript through my research stance. Throughout this study, I also sought feedback from a qualitative methodologist.

### **Researcher Stance**

I have advised this chapter of SKD for more than a decade. When I restarted the chapter, I designed it with access in mind. Rather than only allowing students who achieve membership in SKD, I created a two-tiered system that invited any student to be involved at the club level with the idea that the support they found in the club would help them see themselves as honors students and eventually earn honors status. Therefore, I am closely connected with the club historically, and I spend several hours with club members weekly. Additionally, one of

the research participants was enrolled in one of my classes during this research process. As a researcher, I wanted to explore if the community I anecdotally see could be demonstrated with data.

## FINDINGS

This section introduces the findings from interviews and observational data for each of the smaller cases: Nicole, Renee, and Rose. This will be followed by observational data from the larger case.

### Nicole

Nicole has been a member of this SKD chapter for two years, so this was her second time attending the conference. Reflecting on preparing for her second conference, Nicole said, “Going for the second time, I knew what to expect, and I felt like I was much more involved than the first year in the conference.” Nicole’s first conference was in Atlanta, and the distance from the college dictated that the group fly there together. This year, the conference was close enough to drive, and Nicole opted to ride in the school van to the conference hotel.

The conference sessions started the next day, and Nicole attended a session on language’s impact on attitudes. While attending this session, Nicole met Amy, a university student and member of STD who was alone at the conference. Nicole wanted to support Amy since it was Amy’s first time at the conference.

“It kind of seems like she was a little lost. She was going to the same place I was, and I was just kind of like, come with me. I introduced her to my roommate and invited her out and about.” - Nicole

After this first encounter, Amy became an adopted member of the group, joining us for meals and other events and sessions that were not specific to SKD. Despite Nicole saying that she has never been a fan of poetry, she attended almost every session that featured original poetry. She was able to connect with the poetry through some struggles in her personal life.

“The LGBTQ+ community ones hit home for me, having my life situation, you know, outside of school where my younger brother came out by attempting suicide, and also the grief and loss and depression poetry hit home too for the same reason.” - Nicole

These poetry sessions, along with some that she attended on publishing, encouraged Nicole to take up writing again after the conference. “I have not stopped writing and have just been blowing up my new journal. So, I feel like I’m trying to be more creative when I’m writing, and I feel, like, just super inspired.”

### Renee

This was also Renee’s second year in SKD and second time attending the conference. She served as the chapter’s president even after transferring mid-year to a university. Renee opted to drive herself to the conference because she was not sure if she would have to return to school, mid-conference, to take an exam. Renee also reflected on having a better idea of what to expect when attending the conference for the second time.

“I knew that I would have opportunities to, like, seek out new people that wrote. I knew that I would be able to, like, connect with other students, and...gain new insights to things and be able to ask questions.” - Renee

There were some differences in this year’s conference, though, that Renee also reflected on. Her previous conference experience was the first year the conference was held post COVID-19 lockdowns, which impacted both attendance and policies around travel and masking. “A big difference was, you could feel in, like, the hotels. You could feel the difference between post-COVID and further out, post-COVID.” Renee explained that at her first conference, “We were still told within the conference to wear masks and there was still, like, that fear and rigidity.”

Other differences were apparent when attending SKD-specific sessions. There had been shifts in the organization’s leadership that impacted some of the smoothness of their events. “It just seemed, like, a little bit more

chaotic within them than it did the first year. I could tell that they were kind of scrambling, but it worked out. Everything was fine. I just felt badly for them.” Despite some disorganization, Renee was glad to reconnect with a member of SKD whom she met at the previous conference. “I think of him as my nephew...so my nephew from Alabama. I’m invested in his future, and I felt, like, so proud of him because he’s achieving so well.”

## Rose

This was Rose’s first year in SKD and first time attending the conference. She also decided to drive herself because she needed to leave the conference early for work. Despite being her first time at an academic conference, Rose was prepared for what the conference would be like. “I think I expected it to be exactly what it was like. I expected meeting different people for sure, which we did. I did imagine maybe a little bit more like a classroom setting, not as open as it was.”

Despite these expectations, one of the sessions that Rose attended led her to an “existential crisis.” Rose reflected on attending this session on imposter syndrome and the impact it had on her.

“I started to question, like, these are all people who read academic journals, write them, and help with them, and read all these classics, and they talk about all these authors. I haven’t read, like, 90 percent of these things. I just started to question, am I a natural English major.” – Rose.

After this session, Rose discussed it with other chapter members and her faculty advisors. Eventually, she felt better about the direction she was headed in.

“Everyone’s a little different, and Renee brought that up a little bit. And it helps me talking to you and also Lila, who kind of helped remind me just, you want to pursue law. It’s very different from what a lot of these people are doing. You’re not looking to become a teacher. If that changes, so be it, but as of right now, law is where you’re headed.” - Rose

Despite her “existential crisis,” Rose submitted creative work to the SKD writing contests to “get over the fear of submitting.” She did not win; however, this inspired Rose to work harder for next year’s conference. “It made me actually want to take the time to write something that would be better for the chances of winning.”

## The Larger Case

Despite not arriving at the conference together, the participants were eager to join up in the hotel lobby before finding a group dinner. This was especially shown through Rose opting for street parking in order to join the group quickly, not wanting to arrange for hotel parking until later. We walked down the street to a restaurant that Renee chose and stayed for hours before returning to the hotel with a tentative plan for the next day.

Even with a tentative plan, Nicole texted the group first thing in the morning to make sure that she would not miss the SKD student panel scheduled for that day. The text soon developed into a discussion of all of the sessions they were looking forward to. After I shared where I would be going, Rose texted back, “I knew you’d go to that one!” With that, everyone left for their chosen sessions. Shortly before lunch, Nicole found me and asked if she could bring a student who was not with our group. I assured her that it was fine if the student’s advisor knew where she was. We gathered once more in the lobby and walked across the street to grab sandwiches that we could bring back to the hotel/conference center. While we ate, the planning of the afternoon sessions began. The group broke apart for afternoon sessions with a plan to meet at a nice restaurant for dinner. Once again, Nicole brought her new friend, and we took group pictures before calling it a night.

The next day was the SKD awards ceremony. Unfortunately, we did not arrive early enough to claim a table together and ended up spread around the room. As soon as we found our seats, Rose texted the group, “Miss you guys!” Renee responded, “I know!! But yay cheesecake!” They seemed unhappy to not be seated together, but they also appeared engaged in conversations with students from other schools. Our chapter of SKD won the Chapter of the Year Award, and more group pictures were taken with it. The group broke apart once again to attend a variety of sessions, but we decided to join up in the evening for literary trivia hosted by the conference. Unfortunately, Rose could not join us for the trivia night as she had to leave the conference, return home, and work the next morning.

On the final morning of the conference, I arranged for luggage storage and made sure that everyone was checked out of their rooms with luggage safely stowed. This took long enough that I missed the morning sessions. The STD awards luncheon followed, and the group did not want to deal with being separated again. We stalked the ballroom doors and raced for an empty table as soon as we were allowed in. We chose a table to the back because, as is our tradition, we eat the fancy meal and leave before the STD awards. Nicole's family brought her son into the city, so she left to take him to the zoo rather than ride in the school van back to campus with us.

### Themes Found in the Data

Through the analysis of the smaller cases and the larger case, four themes emerged: faculty as a catalyst for involvement, within-group dynamics, appreciation for college support and connection, and the effects of encountering the larger academic community.

**Faculty As a Catalyst for Involvement.** All the participants spoke of joining the group after one of their faculty members discussed it with them. This conversation was initiated by a faculty member in two of the cases. For Nicole and Rose, this opportunity sounded exciting because they wanted to be with like-minded individuals. Nicole explained, "when my English teacher recommended this honor society to me, it felt, like, really cool, you know, that there was a group of people that were similar to and what I like to do." Rose described her decision to participate in the group by saying,

"Lila reached out to me after, I think, I took her Intro to Lit class. It was just really cool because I had done, like, debate club in high school ...[but] I hadn't had that experience in college, so when the opportunity presented itself, I was very excited because I never got to do anything within English."

Faculty starting the conversation about joining was the catalyst for both Nicole and Rose's membership in the group.

Renee is a student who is highly motivated to join organizations on campus. She has been involved with two other honors organizations but still benefited from a conversation with her faculty member.

"I saw a little bookmark or something that had information on it. I was like, oh yeah, I want to try to do that. And it took me forever to actually get into it. And then I spoke to Lila about it, and she was just like, it doesn't matter, because I thought I had missed the ball because I didn't go in the beginning. She's like, just start coming."

Lila, who was mentioned in two of the participants' comments about joining SKD, is also a faculty advisor of this chapter of SKD and attended the SKD conference. Lila facilitated much of the travel arrangements for the conference, including driving a school van to the conference location and arranging the shared hotel rooms. Renee reflected on the hotel room arrangements and how the faculty advisors give chapter members freedom.

"You take the time to get to know us, and you're sensitive to our own wants ... you are, like, attuned to the people around you. Instead of, like, you're with this person or you're with that person. You were very good about making sure that we felt that we belonged but also having the freedom to, within standards, to do whatever we wanted."

Rose also reflected on her relationships with the faculty advisors. "Lila's very good [at literary trivia]. You're very different in your English, and I've loved it. I loved experiencing from you and from Lila, how different you both are with the way you teach English. It's refreshing."

Renee was able to reach out for support from faculty advisors during the conference. On the third day of the conference, Renee explained that she was having some worrying health issues, and Lila took her to urgent care. Afterward, Renee and I sat down to discuss some of the events in her personal life that are causing her stress. Renee felt comfortable reaching out to the faculty advisors to seek support when it was needed.

All three participants demonstrated that connections with faculty were a central reason for them joining SKD and reflected positively on the relationships they continued to build with faculty through membership in the group and through conference attendance.

### **Within-Group Dynamics**

All the participants felt positive about the group before and after the conference, but they also shared how attending the conference strengthened those bonds.

**Before Conference.** Renee and Nicole had both attended the conference the year before, but I asked them to reflect on their sense of belonging before their first conference experience. For Renee, attending the conference allowed her to meet other group members in person for the first time since, at that time, meetings were being held exclusively on Zoom.

“I was one of the first people at the airport...and I happened to glance up and I was like, oh, I think I know her. It wasn’t until they actually started to cluster together that I was like, oh, that’s my group.”

Despite not having met other group members in person before this moment, she reflected that she felt connected. “I think that I had only attended maybe four meetings before...[but] I always felt comfortable.” Nicole also said that she felt connected to the group before attending the conference. “This club was a really good, like, support system for me.” She also reflected that she had not felt as active in the group as she would like to be but said, “I still feel like there’s a sense of support system with the club.”

Rose held the strongest sense of connection with the group before the conference despite this being her first time traveling with the group. “It’s been my little safety net...we just talk and it’s a safe place.” Rose is also the only participant who joined the group after meetings resumed in person rather than on Zoom, which could explain her stronger sense of connection before attending the conference.

**After Conference.** Nicole and Renee both felt a stronger connection with the group after attending the conference. Renee felt that the group membership established at the conference carried over into her relationships with group members after attending.

“It was like the whole time together were able to attend discussions and hear our frustrations or realize maybe all of us didn’t view something a specific way...or I thought I was the only one thinking that way about some piece of work, but then I realized, oh my gosh, like we all think that way too. So finding our commonalities...helped me.”

Nicole said that attending the conference, “kind of bonded all of the other group members and myself a little bit more.” This was also apparent at the conference when Nicole shared with the group the struggles occurring in her personal life. The group members took time to sit with her, listen to what was going on, and offer help where they could.

Despite Rose describing that she felt strong relationships before and after the conference, she also reflected on how those relationships were deepened by the conference experience. Even though she said, “it couldn’t have gotten better. I think it’s been great from the start,” she also said that after the conference, “we know what’s going on with each other’s lives.” Rose also sought group support after her “existential crisis” and found a great deal of comfort in the responses she got from the group members.

Not only did Rose express a strong connection to this group, but attending the conference led her to be more invested in the group’s future. She reflected that she had struggled in her first attempt at college, but that the group “has been one of the things that I have loved so much.” She added that she wants to see the group “flourish just a little bit more before I go and then hopefully leave it in the hands of a few other people who love it just as much.” She was given the choice to graduate in a semester or an academic year, and she decided to stay for the next academic year in order to hold a leadership position in the group.



## Appreciation for College Connection and Support

The participants' appreciation for their college came from a sense of connection and support. Renee said that the college has a welcoming atmosphere where, "anybody who wants to do this, come in." Nicole enjoyed learning about other ways to be involved on campus because group members are also doing other things at the college. This networking, "open[s] the doors for me to get more involved with other things." One of these new opportunities came in the form of a job opportunity for Rose. Rose got to know the student affairs office as she worked on the paperwork for conference travel. One of the staff members in that office offered her a work-study position for the next year.

Attending the conference also led Renee to appreciate the financial support that the college offers for conference travel. She said that the college "is more invested in getting students involved than worried about checking boxes." She was referencing the funding the students received to attend the conference. Renee reflected on how the students from other colleges had to work hard to get the funds and stated, "just how well off we have it... [the college does] so much for their students."

## Effects of Encountering the Larger Academic Community

All the research participants enjoyed getting to know students from different schools. Nicole enjoyed getting to "really talk more in-depth with someone from another school." Renee also enjoyed finding common ground with students from across the country. When reflecting on hearing other students' work presented at the conference, she said that "it's hard not to find, like, some kind of connection with them." This is even true when Renee held different conclusions or viewpoints from the speakers. She said, "I think that it's important to connect with people who are within kind of the same wheelhouse mentally but have a completely different viewpoint." Rose also enjoyed hearing differing experiences presented through student work. "Everyone's was very different in their perspective." After hearing the variety of student presentations, Rose has decided to work hard to submit her work to present at next year's conference. She said that "after seeing it in person, it feels a lot better, like, I could definitely do it."

At the SKD awards luncheon, the research participants were not able to sit together. They were spread out among conference attendees from a variety of SKD chapters. Although they were nervous about this at first, Rose reflected that she enjoyed meeting different chapters, especially one chapter from Alabama. The "infamous Alabama chapter," as Rose put it, always does well with awards and is seen as our chapter's greatest competition. Although our chapter took home five awards at this conference, the group members were eager to do even better next year.

## DISCUSSION

Social and academic integration (Tinto, 2012) were demonstrated by the research findings. The research participants discussed how connected they felt with other members of the group and the faculty sponsors. This demonstrates findings in line with O'Connor et al.'s (2022) research that conference attendance alone does not create social and academic integration. The connection built among group members along with their faculty advisors is an important part of creating integration and sense of belonging through conference attendance. This suggests that faculty or staff who want to encourage student participation at academic conferences should, at the very least, create a group for those students to meet and bond before the conference and reflect together after the conference. Furthermore, a sense of connection with faculty or staff advisors creates stronger academic integration (Tinto, 2012) and sense of connection (Kirby & Thomas, 2022), which means that the faculty or staff who are arranging conference travel should be involved with the group and travel to the conference if they can.

Whether or not a group is formed to support conference attendance, the findings do demonstrate that attending an undergraduate academic conference can help students discover their identity (Jones, 2019) in the larger academic culture and be prepared to participate in academic conversations. Community college students can have voices that are often left out of the conversations happening in their academic field. Lifting these voices can be a core part of social change (Jones, 2019). The research participants felt more comfortable submitting their work to the conference after attending one because they could better visualize what happens at an academic

conference. Colleges should promote conference attendance early in a student's academic career to foster more involvement in the larger academic community later. Faculty and staff can find a wide selection of undergraduate conferences focused on different subjects, as well as general undergraduate conferences like the one hosted by Phi Theta Kappa each year. This research demonstrates that requiring students to submit work to the conference before being allowed to attend might limit those who are less sure of what conferences are and do not know what to expect at them. Encouraging conference attendance can increase the variety of student voices in these academic conversations.

However, attending academic conferences can be a challenge for community college students if funding is not made available. When looking at data for the larger case, students from one community college, the majority of these students (73%) receive financial aid according to the school's IPEDS data. This means that the likelihood of community college students being able to fund the costs of plane tickets, hotel rooms, and conference registration is less likely. Furthermore, community college students might face additional costs due to travel that add to the financial strain. Both Renee and Nicole, for example, are single mothers who needed to arrange childcare during their absence. Removing some, if not all, of the financial burden of traveling to a conference can make it far more likely for community college students to attend. Colleges should make such funding available to students. Those who wish to find funding for their students to attend conferences can speak to the benefits of conference attendance.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There were some limitations to this study, which created opportunities for further research. The first limitation is that the data collection was done by the group's advisor. Although this group has a tight-knit and trusting relationship, the power dynamic created through my role as both researcher and advisor cannot be ignored. Further research should be done on this topic by a researcher who can avoid, as much as possible, any power dynamics that could affect the data that is collected.

A second limitation of this study is the sample size. Due to my role as the group's advisor, I was careful not to unfairly motivate students to participate. I made the opportunity available to them and did not push for any participation beyond that. This meant that I only had three participants in this case study. Future research with more student participants could provide enlightening results.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to explore how attending an academic conference contributes to a community college student's sense of belonging. Although this research demonstrates greater bonding during and after conference attendance, as well as a sense of belonging within the college and the larger academic community, more research is needed to explore the impact of conference attendance and the impact of financial assistance for students who wish to travel. Despite this need for additional research, the findings from this study demonstrate many positive impacts attending a conference has on students. Whether or not I engage further with research on this subject, my peers will find me next year, filling out paperwork to bring a new batch of students to their conference.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to acknowledge Maria K. E. Lahman, Ph.D. This research was made possible through her support and guidance.

## REFERENCES

- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (4th ed.)*. Sage.
- Dean, P., & Kelly, C. (2020). Educational travel for first-generation students. *Teaching Sociology*, 48(4), 341–352. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26978724>
- Jones, S. R. (2019). Waves of change: The evolving history of student development theory. In E. S. Abes, S. R. Jones, & D-L. Stewart (Eds.), *Rethinking college student development theory using critical frameworks* (pp. 7-16). Stylus.
- Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2014). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
- Lahman, M. K. E. (2018). *Ethics in social science research: Becoming culturally responsive*. Sage.
- Kirby, L. A., & Thomas, C. L. (2022). High-impact teaching practices foster a greater sense of belonging in the college classroom. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(3), 368-381. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1950659>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Undergraduate retention and graduation rates*. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/ctr/undergrad-retention-graduation>
- O'Connor, B. H., Kirsch, H., & Maestas, N. (2022). "I learned that I don't have to change:" Migrant/seasonal farmworker undergraduates' experiences at academic conferences. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2022.2097746>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- Stewart, D-L., & Brown, S. (2019). Social construction of identities. In E. S. Abes, S. R. Jones, & D-L. Stewart (Eds.), *Rethinking college student development theory using critical frameworks* (pp. 110-125). Stylus.
- Strayhorn, T. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
- Tinto, V. (2012). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition (2nd ed.)*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Whatley, M., & Stich, A. (2021). From exclusive to inclusive: A mixed-methods investigation of study abroad participation and practices. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 92(1), 140-167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2020.1768778>