Dear First Years,

For most students the first year at Kalamazoo College is an exciting and challenging time, filled with new experiences, ideas, viewpoints and concerns. Many students find that, in order to adapt effectively to college life and its demands, they need to develop new ways of coping, academically, interpersonally, and personally. We've written this pamphlet to describe the concerns we hear first year students talk about most and to give you some ideas for coping with them. In the first section, Dr. Alan Hill describes the concept of "academic zoning" and the obstacles first year students face in finding their "zone" of maximum performance. The second section, prepared by Ms. Patricia Livingston, focuses on the interpersonal concerns first year students typically experience and presents practical ideas for working them out. The changes many first year students experience with respect to self-esteem and identity are the subject of the final section of the pamphlet, written by Dr. Pat Ponto.

Before you read about specific concerns, we want you to know that we're aware of both how wonderful and how difficult the first year at "K" can be. The personal growth that students experience is often quite amazing—but not always easy or smooth. First year students frequently report that they feel stuck in the process of adapting to college life. We believe that everyone needs help getting "unstuck" at times. That help can make the difference between reaching your educational goal and dropping out of college. We hope you'll come to the Counseling Center when you feel stuck and your usual ways of getting "unstuck" aren't working as well as they have in the past. We also hope you'll come to the forums we're offering to first year students to talk more about arriving at K. Hopefully, they'll give you a chance to think through whatever issues this major life transition brings to you.

—The Counseling Center Staff
OBSTACLES TO ACADEMIC ZONING AT “K”

Athletes are “in the zone” when they feel focused, energized, confident, and capable of maximal performance in a seemingly effortless manner. Athletic “zoning” requires the development of athletic skills to the point that they are almost second-nature which, in turn, requires a strong motivation to succeed. Similarly, academic "zoning" requires well-honed academic skills and a strong desire to develop and use these skills. What follows are eight major obstacles to academic zoning at "K”.

1. Denial of Need for Development of Academic and Time-Management Skills
   (“Hey, I got by or even did well in high school without these so-called academic skills. I didn’t need to take great notes, and I could cram in enough info into a study hall before class to do just fine on a multiple guess exam.”) Such strategies, as above, will not fly at “K”. You will need to develop your writing, reading, studying, note-taking, public speaking, project development and test-taking skills. It is important to note that three academic units at “K” require about 45 hours of a student’s time per week, including classroom time, laboratory periods and preparation. So, to achieve balance in your college life, you will need to develop and implement time-management skills and let-go of unrealistic/perfectionistic standards.

2. Perfectionism (“I have to do the best”)
   Certainly it would be nice to be the best, but if you demand perfection at “K,” you will likely find yourself upset, unhappy and angry (at yourself) most of the time. Your self-worth will be on the line for every paper and test, and you’ll anticipate possible imperfection with “too much anxiety," and enter the panic zone.

3. Too Much Anxiety (“It would be terrible, awful or horrible if I don’t do well”)
   Too much anxiety leaves you panicky, hyper, scattered, nervous, easily distracted and unable to concentrate, which is not a good state in which to study, do a paper or take a test. Furthermore, to escape too much anxiety, you may start practicing some self-defeating behaviors such as: worrying, workaholism, boob-tubing, substance abuse and/or procrastination.

4. Procrastination (“It’s easier to put off studying until the last minute”)
   One way to eliminate all that anxiety about academics is to take a pint of "put-off." Though putting-off may work in the short-run, in the long run it will lead to academic disaster and many more problems to get “too anxious” about. At this point “getting stoned” looks like a good way to escape this mess.

5. Substance Use (“Smoking weed/boozing/binging helps me relax and get away from things for awhile”)
   Like procrastination, substance use works for the short-run, but not for the long-run. You risk addiction to the substance and preclude learning healthier ways to deal with your stress. You also risk (especially with pot) entering the drone zone, where you experience “too little anxiety” to take care of business.
6. **Too Little Anxiety ("No problems, everything's cool")**
   With too little concern about academics, you aren’t motivated to do what you need to do to succeed academically. You’ll likely start to feel lethargic, sluggish and bored regarding your college experience. Eventually, since you are at odds with the main purpose of "K," you’ll feel alienated from the school.

7. **Alienation ("Who cares, it doesn’t matter, I don’t know why I’m here, I don’t belong")**
   You may experience “K” as irrelevant, meaningless or even as antithetical to your self-development. You may experience yourself as separate, invisible and/or isolated from the College community. Such experiences can be associated with feelings of disorientation, powerlessness, loneliness, rage and hopelessness. Hopefully feelings of shame will not prevent you from getting some help.

8. **Shame ("I can’t admit having any problems. I can take care of my problems by myself. What will they think of me?")**
   Shame can stop you from taking care of the above obstacles to academic zoning. One student waited until the last week of his academic career to ask for help because he thought instructors, advisors and counselors would look down on him. Come on in, you’ll get our respect for taking care of yourself and your life will be easier.
INTERPERSONAL LIFE AT "K"

Relationships are a significant part of your college experience. They can greatly impact how you feel about "K" and about yourself. Entering a new place with no prior friendships or connections can be scary as well as exciting and freeing. You're able to start over where no preconceived ideas about you exist. Along with hopes and expectations for this new start, however, are your familiar ways of dealing with people. Some of these may work quite well and others may not. You, may require new skills to deal with the most common relationship issues experienced by first year college students, which have to do with loneliness, roommates, romantic relationships, and meeting new people.

Loneliness often arises after a major life change such as going to college and leaving behind family and friends. The people and places that have been the mainstay of your life will no longer be part of your daily routine and you will probably feel lonely until you make new connections to people here. The first step in overcoming loneliness is learning to be comfortable with yourself. Take time to look within yourself, to recognize your talents and strengths, and to consider what thoughts or beliefs you hold that may be keeping you from making friends. The second step is to expand your social and communication skills. Show respect and acceptance of others as they are. Listen carefully to what others say and let them know that you hear them and understand. Be honest about who you are and talk about what is important to you while also acknowledging the legitimacy of others' feelings and beliefs. These behaviors form the basis for a strong, honest friendship, roommate relationship, or romantic relationship.

Roommate relationships usually play a central role in first year students' experience of "K". Some roommates become best friends; others live together well, but have different friends; and still others struggle with sharing a room with a person with whom they don't get along. Whatever your situation is, it is important to negotiate a compatible living arrangement. We recommend that each of you define how you feel about private space, personal vs. communal property, study and sleep habits, music and noise preferences, and policies about visitors at the beginning of the year. Work out how you'll manage the differences that you have (this process may take a while!) and, then, follow through on those agreements. When conflict arises, handle it as quickly and directly as possible (otherwise it festers inside of you or comes out in indirect ways).

Here are some guidelines for handling conflict:
1. Address the problem specifically, clearly and directly. Don't bring up other conflicts or past hostilities.
2. Confront the issue, not the person. Respect others' feelings and views by listening. Describe your feelings and views objectively.
3. Generate possible solutions. Once you understand the conflict, together try and list as many possible solutions as you can.
4. Evaluate the possible solutions. Try to find one that meets each person's needs, goals and views.
5. Decide on a solution. This will involve compromise for all, which sometimes feels like losing. In an effective compromise, however, each individual "wins" by getting something that is important to him/her.
Remember that conflict may feel hard or even "bad," but that it has important benefits. Conflict tells us clearly what’s important to us and to others and, therefore, helps us better understand both ourselves and others.

Many first year students report concerns about romantic relationships. The most common concerns are about handling differences or conflict (see above) and making decisions related to sexuality. Students often seem to feel pressured to follow what they perceive to be their peers' norms regarding sexual behavior. We believe that it is very important to clarify your own feelings and views about sexuality and to realize they may be different from your friends. Being true to yourself about your sexuality is crucial in maintaining your feelings of self-esteem and self-worth. It also enhances the development of mutual honesty, respect and caring in your relationships.

Finally, many first year students have difficulty meeting new people. They report feeling uncomfortable, not knowing what to say, and worrying that they won't be accepted. The most important way to deal with this anxiety is to continue to put yourself in social situations in order to gain more confidence. Set small goals for yourself such as saying hello to one new person during the day, smiling to someone in class, or staying for an hour at a party. When you're in a group, attend to the conversation carefully, follow up on others' comments, and practice injecting yourself into the conversation when an opening exists.
FEELINGS ABOUT SELF

Self-esteem is the degree to which we value ourselves and feel worthwhile. Many students report that their self-esteem decreases during their first year at “K”. This loss in self-esteem seems to result mainly from the change in the group of students to whom you will be comparing yourself. First year students often say that in high school . . . "I was one of the best students in all of my classes," "I was active in everything and still got good grades," "Everyone knew me and all the teachers thought I was great," and "I felt better about myself." By choosing to attend a highly selective liberal arts college, however, you’ve placed yourself in a whole class of first year students who can say similar things. It’s no wonder that the sense of specialness and self-worth you felt in high school gets shaken up at “K”. The important thing is not to let your sense of self get shaken too badly. To avoid that, try to stop comparing yourself to other students in your classes or in your hall, remember that you have the ability to succeed here or you wouldn’t have been admitted, choose the courses and topics that you care most about, and continue to do your best work. If you follow these suggestions, you will do well and further develop your sense of self-worth.

A second issue related to feelings about self that first year students often report is questioning their identity. In the next year, you may find yourself feeling uncertain, even lost, and asking the difficult, basic life questions, “Who am I?”; “Where am I going?”; and “What’s it all for?”. Much of this uncertainty in the first year of college seems to result from having roommates, professors and friends who come from different backgrounds and have different values and beliefs. As you get to know these people, they may directly or indirectly cause you to question your beliefs. Ideas and values that have been so reliable in the past may seem misinformed, naive, or even wrong. If that happens, give yourself plenty of time to sort through your uncertainties and to rethink your point of view. Keeping a diary or a journal is often the best way to clarify feelings and ideas and to better understand your own perspective. Conversations with friends about differences in values and viewpoints can be helpful in testing out what you think and learning about other points of view. Many students also find that creative expressions like poetry writing, art, dance and music are good ways to learn more about themselves.

A much more specific aspect of the issue of identity focuses on choosing a major and a career path. Students typically report concern about these choices as they approach sophomore year. The Center for Careers and Professional Development offers career assessment tools, workshops, and advising help students evaluate their interests and abilities and make informed choices.

We hope this article has given you an idea of the kinds of concerns, issues, and obstacles that you and others you’ll meet may face during your first year at "K". Often, just knowing that you are not the only one who is experiencing these difficulties provides some relief. We also hope we’ve made suggestions that will be useful to you in coping with these typical academic, interpersonal, and personal problems. We look forward to meeting you at our first year forums in the fall, where we’ll talk in more depth about these concerns and about your responses to arriving at "K".

Other resources that may be helpful to you:
• Academic Concerns
   Your professors
   Your academic advisor
   The Writing Center for help on papers of any kind
   The Collaborative Learning Center for help with calculus and other computational skills

• Personal and Interpersonal Concerns
   Residence Hall Staff
   Counseling Center
   Dean of Students Office

• Career Information and Decisions
   The Center for Career and Professional Development

COUNSELING CENTER INFORMATION

The Counseling Center, which is located in Room 175 of Hicks (just under the Caf and next to the Student Health Center) is staffed for four licensed psychologists and four doctoral student interns. The office is open Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Appointments can be made by filling out the blue sheet, which can be found on the credenza in the entryway or on our website. Our counseling services are confidential and free to "K" students.