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TRANSITION TO COLLEGE FOR AUTISM STUDENT

Higher Education Disability Professionals Perceptions on Transition Processes for College  
Freshmen with Autism Spectrum Disorders

by

Shontaye M. Witcher

Dissertation

Submitted to the College of Education  
Eastern Michigan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Educational Leadership

Dissertation Committee:

Rema Reynolds, PhD, Chair

Carmen McCallum, PhD

David Anderson, PhD

Calvin McFarland, EdD

Patrice Bounds, PhD

February 20, 2020

Ypsilanti, Michigan

Dedication

I would like to first dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without you, I am nothing, and with you, I am everything.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my grandparents Rev. James and Princesa Witcher, LaSalle and Ruby Johnson, and Will (Bill) Burnell. You all are always in my heart, and I will member you all always. Rest in heaven. I miss you all so much.

### Acknowledgments

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Bennie, thank you for taking on all of this and never letting me take the easy path and understanding that I can only do and be so much. Thank you for taking the lead when I could not handle it.

To my cohort Angela, Tamela, Rhonda, Alex, and LaMarcus, thank you for driving the end of 2020. Dr. Jen, you are awesome sauce. Thank you for bringing the best work out of me.

To the Ross, Faust, Nash, Seals, Wilson, Jackson, Jones, and the Maybanks family, thank you for listening and being a part of the journey. Class of 90, and all of my teachers. An exceptional teacher, Ms. Glenda Thomas that has always believed in me.

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If I have forgotten to mention you, please blame it on my mind and not my heart.

2/20/20

### Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze the perceptions of 14 higher education disability professions (HEDPs) from 4-year public universities in Michigan regarding the transition process for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from secondary to postsecondary institutions. A phenomenological analysis approach was used to analyze data. ASD is a lifelong disorder, and people with ASD who seek postsecondary education require individualized supports. Additionally, a growing number of students with ASD are attending college after high school, so universities need to be prepared for them. ASD students have unique communication, social, and behavioral characteristics and need accommodations to help them achieve academic success. The transition to college can be arduous for these students, and a failure to plan appropriately will nearly always lead to the first-semester failure.

Virtual interviews were conducted with participants in which they responded to a 21-question survey instrument that was developed for this study. Five research questions examined retention, barriers, gaps, support services, and practices. Open-ended interviews provided key data, which I analyzed using a theoretical framework informed by transformative worldview inquiry, disability theory, organizational theory, and critical race theory.

Nine themes and multiple subthemes emerged from this analysis. These themes identified key factors impacting the postsecondary transition process for students with ASD: parental involvement, accommodations, influencers of success, social and independent functioning, ASD issues, career employment, the transition from K-12 to postsecondary, faculty, and academic functioning. The appendices contain supportive materials to guide the

potential implementation of this study for stakeholders: Transition from High School to College Overview Tool, Transition Tool for Students with Autism for College, Transition Tool for Parents, and Informal Inventory for Schools. These tools assist with understanding the key elements that support a successful transition to college for students with autism.

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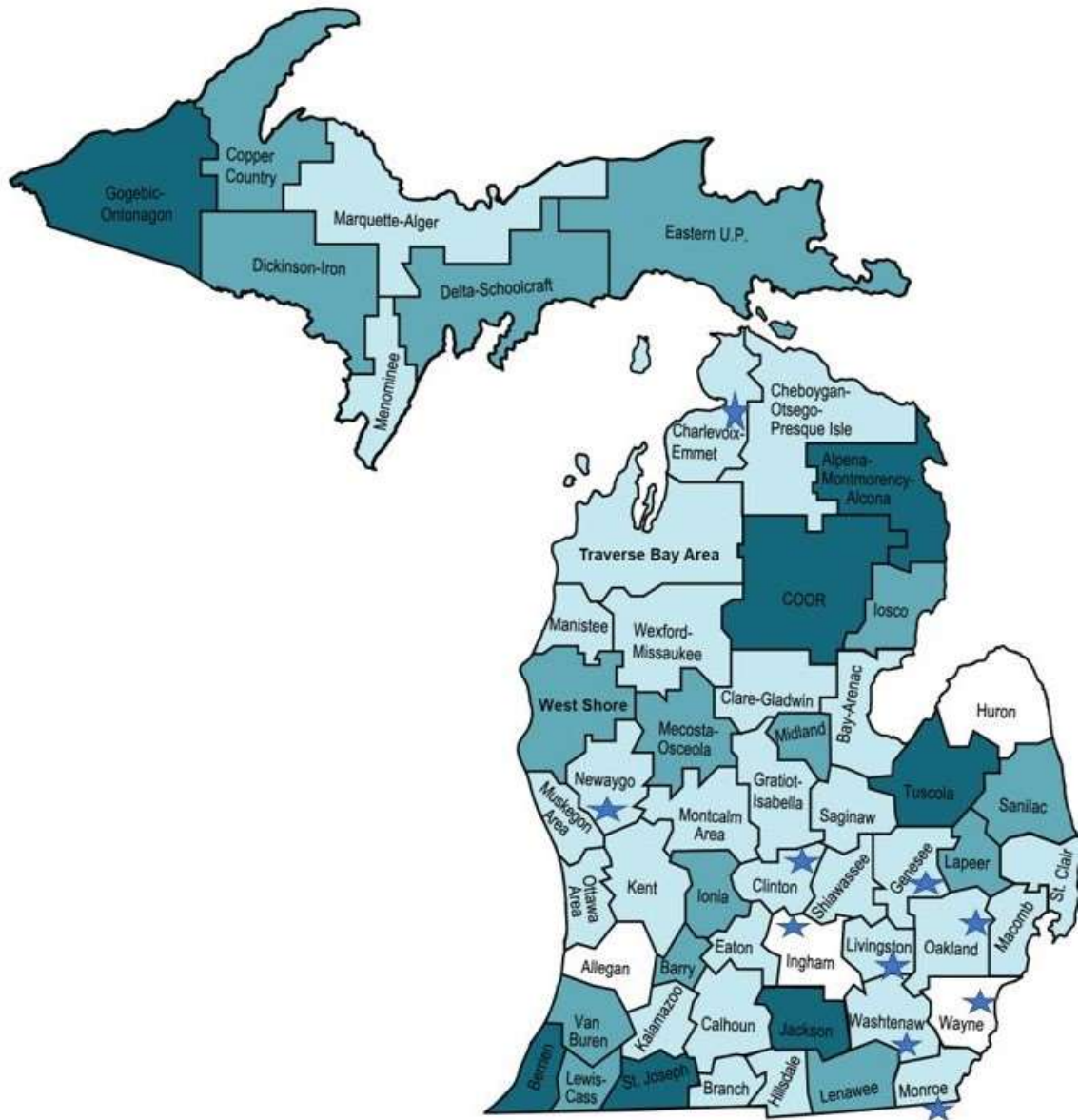
## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction to the Study**

In 2018-2019, Michigan.gov (2019) reported that 10.3% of students in K-12 in Michigan schools were eligible for special education services due a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Data is collected on students the first Wednesday of every year in October and updated annually in the spring. ASD occurs across all ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups, according to the Centers for Disease Control (2014). There are more boys than girls with autism, and they are all unique. In the State of Michigan, programs and activities are monitored. This data protects students with disabilities and their families under federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). IDEA covers students from birth through age 21, whereas in Michigan, coverage is provided from birth to age 26. Special education is provided by 56 Intermediate School Districts (ISDs; see Figure 1) and school districts, including public, charter, and academies, in Michigan. The ISDs with the most significant number of students with ASD are Livingston Educational Service Agency (ESA) (16.30%), Washtenaw ESA (16.20%), and Newaygo County RESA (14.60%) according to MI School Data (2019; see Table 1). Due to these numbers in Michigan, students with ASD will be transitioning from K-12 to adulthood.

Figure 1

*Map of Michigan's 56 Intermediate School Districts*



*Note.* This figure was adapted from 2003 *Intermediate School Districts in Michigan*, Mackinac Center for Public Policy (<https://www.mackinac.org/V2003-29>). In the public domain.

Table 1

*2018-2019 Highest Percentage of Autism Spectrum Disorder by Michigan ISD/Agency*

ISD/Agency	Total Special Education Population	Percent ASD
Livingston ESA	3,065	16.30%
Washtenaw ISD	6,586	16.20%
Newaygo County RESA	1,182	14.60%
Clinton County RESA	1,198	12.20%
Ingham ISD	6,150	12.10%
Genesee ISD	9,454	11.90%
Charlevoix-Emmet ISD	1,198	11.90%
Wayne RESA	36,457	11.80%
Oakland Schools	23,271	11.80%
Monroe ISD	3,422	11.70%

Table 1 illustrates the agencies within the (Intermediate School District) ISD and (Regional Educational Service Center) RESA synonymously percentages of ASD students. (MI School Data, 2019).

Students with ASD are attending universities at higher rates (Wehman et al., 2014). According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013), ASD is a range of cognitive development conditions characterized by repetitive behaviors and challenges in social and communication skills. ASD, a neurodevelopmental condition, has increased by 120% since 2002 (Shmulsky et al., 2017). Social relationships, education, employment, and quality of life affect ASD students into adulthood (Pinder-Amaker, 2014; Shmulsky et al., 2017). ASD is a lifelong condition that impacts the way individuals with the disorder interface with the world around them (Lang & Persico, 2019). Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2017) stated:

Although the symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) tend to improve from adolescence into adulthood (Shattuck et al., 2007), autistic individuals often struggle



with transitioning into college and the workforce (Van Bergeijk et al., 2008; Hendricks, 2010; Kapp et al., 2011) (p. 1.)

Since the 2000s, there has been a 46% upsurge in enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, which recognizes that postsecondary education is the key to success in adult life (Shmulskiy et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). Higher lifetime income, lower unemployment, and better health are associated with a postsecondary degree (Newman et al., 2011; Shmulsky et al., 2017). Multiple barriers continue to hinder students' progress and successful completion of a college degree, despite an increase in rates of students with disabilities attending college (Francis et al., 2018). Students with ASD represent a growing population with needs and supports to assist with transitioning to college.

ASD students are participating in mainstream education, work, and the community. An estimated 50,000 students with autism enter adulthood each year, with one-third of these individuals entering college after high school (Buechler, 2017). Students with ASD have a goal of continuing their education, while most of their expectations may not be met after high school. According to Shmulsky et al. (2017), 57% of students with ASD focus on postsecondary education, 14% on employment, and 29% are disengaged with planning after high school. College retention rates for students with ASD remain low, despite resources to help them complete their college degree (Longtin, 2014). ASD students are different from other students with disabilities. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2014), 1 in 59 children are diagnosed with ASD, and, in the United States, the costs were estimated to be between \$11.5 billion and \$60.9 billion. Direct and indirect damages, from medical care to special education to loss of parental productivity, are economic burdens

for students with ASD (CDC, 2014). Secondary school is helping students with ASD navigate the educational experience; however, postsecondary institutions struggle with the best way to respond to the needs of students with ASD (Wolf et al., 2009). The transition between high school and college can be challenging for individuals with disabilities (Geller & Greenberg, 2009). Due to mandated supports at the university level for students with ASD, universities question whether the accommodations and supports assist the student in meeting their academic needs (Accardo et al., 2018). These struggles fall on higher education disability professionals (HEDPs) in disability offices to determine the most appropriate support for students within the classroom and the campus environment. According to Kim and Lee (2016), predictors of academic success for students with disabilities are support services and accommodations. Therefore, postsecondary institutions are faced with the challenge of expanding their supports and services to accommodate the diverse needs of this population due to the continuous climb of ASD students (Dymond et al., 2017). Postsecondary institutions are beginning to illuminate the barriers to college success for students with ASD.

HEDPs within disability offices work directly with students to provide indirect provisions of accommodations and support services for individuals with disabilities. These professionals within disability offices are a small part of the postsecondary institution; however, they are an entity of the organization (Collins & Mowbray, 2005). They are not responsible for meeting all the needs of individuals with a disability on their campus; it is an institutional responsibility, including the entire campus community. According to Hamlet (2014), barriers exist to accessing services due to multi-layered structures consisting of concerns surrounding disclosure, the process for requesting accommodations, and the

substantial changes between accessing disability services in college compared to high school. Although services are in place to support students, the role of the HEDPs professional is to assist the university with meeting federal and state requirements. The goal of this professional is to ensure accessibility among all students and staff at the university. There is no cost associated with services that the colleges provide if the student is eligible for assistance. Some colleges offer supports beyond what the college or university can provide (Wehman et al., 2009). Some colleges charge fees to additional services that require extra support. Colleges in Michigan that have special programs are Eastern Michigan University and Western Michigan University. Grand Valley State University currently offers a free program with housing support. Colleges within the state are investigating the options for added programs for their disability office. According to Wehman et al. (2009), students must understand how to obtain accommodations and that ASD students do not fully utilize their accommodations once they disclose. An issue for students with ASD is that they lack understanding of the supports received in high school, which affected their learning and are unable to articulate their needs (Wehman et al., 2009). Disability Offices are attempting to meet the needs of students.

Access to higher education for a student with ASD has not always been an option. A post-school outcome for students with ASD and other students with disabilities is attending postsecondary education (Wehman et al., 2014). According to the CDC (2016), many students with ASD will be exiting high school and entering postsecondary education (Dymond et al., 2017). These students can complete higher education with supports and accommodations, which may be different from those needed by students with other disabilities. ASD students face lower success rates in postsecondary education, with fewer

than 40% completion (Accardo et al., 2018; Newman et al. 2011). Students with ASD struggle with building relationships. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) reported that in 2014, 16.4 percent of people with a disability and 34.6% of people with no disability had completed at least a bachelor's degree. The Bureau cited that individuals with a bachelor's degree without a disability were employed at 75.9%, whereas students with a disability were employed at 26.1%. Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2017) noted some of these issues stating:

Many autistic adults have few or no close social relationships outside of the family, are unable to live independently and are either unemployed or employed in jobs that are not commensurate with their skills (Howlin et al., 2004; Shattuck et al., 2011a; Hillier & Galizzi, 2014). These poor outcomes stand in stark contrast to the viewpoint shared by many autistic self-advocates, parents, and professionals that autistic adults have the potential to contribute substantially to society (e.g., Prince, 2010; Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, 2011; Wehman et al., 2014). (p. 2)

These issues affect a student's academic progress for success. Academic and personal failure during college is an increased risk for ASD students during their college years (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). According to Wehman et al. (2014), individuals with ASD experience low rates of college completion, employment, independent living, and life-long friendships after graduation. Institutions of higher education have a keen state in statistics:

“Low graduation rates are also costly to institutions and remains one of the constant measures of institutional performance” (McFarland, 2017, p. 3).

Students struggle with interdependence and autonomy after high school; however, laws are available to assist them with transitioning from secondary education

Over the past several decades, policy development between secondary and postsecondary education have attributed to enhancing the abilities for students to access as well as prepare for college (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) have allowed more inclusion for students with disabilities. With appropriate supports and accommodations, students with ASD can complete a traditional 2 or 4-year degree program (Dymond et al., 2017). Students now have opportunities to attend college; however, universities struggle with support and resources for helping them be successful. Most students are underprepared for postsecondary coursework. According to a Virginia Department of Education report (2012), all students and their families must prepare for the transition from high school to college to ensure that students have skills to achieve desired goals (Lotkowski et al., 2004). In particular, students with disabilities require extra support to prepare for college due to their weak organizational skills, distractibility, difficulties with understanding cues or body language, and self-regulation (McKeon et al., 2013). To educate a student with a disability is more costly than teaching a student without limitations (Yell, 1995). Funding to support students with disabilities is never enough to meet the requirements by law (Dillon, 2007). Students may need extra accommodations such as support, assistive technology, and personnel for success.

ASD students are a part of the incoming population arriving on college campuses. An informal survey of 42 universities stated that 4.2 students with ASD are attending 4-year institutions, while 8.9 students are attending community and technical colleges (Wolf et al., 2009). Without the support and assistance of support services, administration, and faculty, students with ASD may experience barriers due to multiple backgrounds of diverse identities

as well as education intentions and expectations. The numbers will continue to grow with a prevalence estimate of 1:150 (CDC, 2007; Wolf et al., 2009). ASD students are demonstrating that they have cognitive abilities capable of university-level education.

Postsecondary success may be linked to understanding the origins of ASD. ASD was initially thought to be a childhood disorder; however, it manifests into adolescence and childhood with severe implications for functionality. According to the Merriam-Dictionary (n.d.), autism is defined as a developmental disorder with severities, which are characterized by difficulties in interaction and social communication with restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behavior. Individuals with ASD exhibit different neurological effects, and public behaviors can include defiance, inattentiveness, boredom, and rudeness. Students with ASD may experience sensory overload and stress due to social and communication requirements (White et al., 2016). Some transitional challenges for these students consist of time management, attending classes, consistent studying, organizing course materials, and navigating educational services and resources. When students who receive accommodations transition into college, the issues as mentioned earlier can cause various problems and affect their progress towards graduation. Providing access alone may not be enough for ASD students to obtain the benefits of a college education (Dell et al., 2016).

Individuals diagnosed with ASD experience difficulties with communication and social skill deficits. Some may have cognitive impairments that exclude them from attending college. However, some students with ASD perform well academically if they have a personal interest in the subject matter being taught (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). Some collective strengths of students with ASD include excellent visual and long-term memory, attention to detail, ability to learn the material quickly, tendency to be logical, perfectionism

with an eagerness to please, ability to learn routines, follow the rules and schedules, vast knowledge of specific subjects of interest, and exceptional talent in art, music, and technology. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, persistent deficits of ASD include social communication and interaction, nonverbal communicative behaviors, and relationship building. Other impairments consist of communication skills, poor social skills, repetitive behaviors, and management of daily living activities (APA, 2013). Due to early diagnosis, many individuals with ASD are considering post-secondary education.

Students with ASD are characterized by cognitive and social deficits, which may hinder their learning opportunities in higher education (Van Hees et al., 2015). A diagnosis of ASD provides students with strengths and challenges as they navigate postsecondary education. Universities offer minimal assistance for students entering college, which is different from the accommodations received in secondary school. IDEA outlines requirements for K-12 students with ASD (U.S. Department of Education, 1990). Students have achieved at the secondary level, and the pursuit of higher education is desirable. At the university level, students are accommodated with minimal supports making disability support offices important in understanding the systems necessary for encouraging success for this population. All students benefit when universities improve pedagogical strategies that hinder transition for freshmen students with ASD (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009).

Students with ASD are an emerging population on college and university campuses. Administrators and practitioners need to understand how to support their experiences and endeavors (Segall & Campbell, 2012). At least 38.8% of students with disabilities attend postsecondary education, compared to 52.4% of the general population and 40.7% of those

with disabilities (Jackson et al., 2018). Statistics on college enrollment for students with ASD are not precise; however, ASD students have the required cognitive ability (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). Attending college can be a significant life event, with or without the proper supports. HEDPs must understand how to support the academic success of students who self-disclose their ASD. Otherwise, such students may face social, learning sensory, and organizational challenges that may go unnoticed by professors and staff (Oslund, 2013).

According to Nevill and White (2011), there are more opportunities for students to obtain higher education than ever before. However, success may be contingent on the support available at the postsecondary level. The support services experienced by an ASD student in K-12 are different at the postsecondary level. Some of the patterns of care used to matriculate students from primary and secondary education are uncommon in college. Students must advocate and manage their accommodations on their own. High schools have recently begun preparing students for the transition into college to get them to graduation (Murray, 2015). While in high school, and earlier, many parents function as advocates for students, the CEOs of their children's education. Parents of college students are not allowed as much access or control. According to Reynolds (2010), "Parents have the power to shape and mold the self-image of their children" (p. 159). Parents can be the influencer of success.

Additionally, students in postsecondary education have access to neither Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) nor special education services. Once a student becomes 18 years of age, they are responsible for their grades, records, and accommodations under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA). These accommodations are governed under civil rights protections (Murray, 2015). Protection for students' educational records' privacy is governed by FERPA, which regulates access of



public information and documents to public entities, including all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.). In primary and secondary schools, students are required to have access to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment possible. Colleges are not required to adhere to this obligation but are responsible for providing resources and reasonable accommodations to help students succeed. Students must disclose and request accommodations, and colleges are not responsible for making sure students use their resources. The goal of these relaxed requirements is to help students gain independence at the postsecondary level; however, this independence may bring with it a path to failure due to a lack of support services.

In higher education, students are responsible for requesting accommodations and providing evidence of a diagnosis that qualifies them for reasonable classroom accommodations. Additionally, students may require more than academic accommodations to help them accomplish their educational goals. In high school, students receive accommodations with oversight, but in postsecondary education, students must advocate for themselves while struggling with communication and challenges with independence (White et al., 2016). ASD students experience barriers to retention that include time management, coursework, social interaction, and daily activities (Hadley & Addison, 2016). A student's experience with the transition in their first year of postsecondary education may determine their success and retention. Although the number of students entering postsecondary education is increasing, the number of earning a degree is decreasing. According to Kuder and Accardo (2017), only 38.8% of students with ASD completed postsecondary education. This number contrasts sharply with 60% of neurotypical students who graduate (U.S.

Department of Education, 2017). Neurotypical students are attending college and are capable of graduating with supports.

Studies have found that colleges have many challenges and difficulties in meeting the needs of ASD students. These challenges seem to vary by level, with community colleges appearing more accessible than 4-year institutions. The United States Government Accountability Office (2009) reported postsecondary problems to occur when students are unaware of their rights and responsibilities regarding accommodation needs. Community colleges seem to be more comfortable for ASD students to navigate due to their flexibility. However, some 4-year colleges and universities offer a familiar culture and closeness to home that can be essential to success for ASD students (Anderson, 2018). Without that proximity to home, some ASD students who live on-campus experience mental health crises due to the demands of academic and social issues (Anderson, 2018). In secondary education, some of the patterns of care used to matriculate students from primary and secondary education are uncommon in college or the workforce. Students must self-advocate for themselves and manage their disorder on their own. High schools are preparing students for transition differently; however, their goal is to get students to graduation (Murray, 2015). Parents are advocates for students, and they are the directors of their child's education, whereas, in college, parents are not allowed to spearhead their student's schooling. Once a student becomes 18, they are responsible for their grade, records, and accommodations under FERPA (Murray, 2015). FERPA protects the privacy of student education records, which governs access of public information and documents to public entities, including all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education (2018). Colleges are not required to adhere to this obligation. They are responsible for providing

resources and reasonable accommodations to help students thrive in their academics. Students must disclose and request accommodations. Colleges are not accountable for making sure students use their resources as required in secondary education. The goal is to help students gain independence and transition successfully.

Most college campuses have an office called Disability Support Services. Due to the ADA, institutions in the U.S. must provide reasonable accommodations to students pursuing postsecondary education. These offices must provide students with disabilities with equal opportunities to participate in the institution's activities, programs, and services, including extra-curricular programs (Pillay & Bhat, 2012). This office provides accommodations and eligibility for students with a disability (Wehman et al., 2009). Students with a diagnosis of a disability are eligible for accommodations within this office. Services are at no cost to the student and help students have a fair chance. Services do not provide an unfair advantage for students that disclose their disability (Johnson & Hines, 2005). Students are afforded decision-making powers as adults to voluntarily disclose their disability with appropriate documentation (Freedman, 2010). Within this office, HEDPs help support students with accommodations.

Higher education disability professionals assist students in meeting their academic needs. HEDPs are the first contact for students entering into college. They help with recommendations for accommodations and review all necessary documentation. HEDPs ensure that all reasonable accommodations are required legally and feasible for students (Oslund, 2014). University personnel are not knowledgeable of the students' specific disabilities; however, they have information on the accommodations that are entitled to the student (Oslund, 2014). HEDPs are unable to ask for disability status directly: "The right to

disclose a disability or the specifics of disability remain with the disabled individual, not the institution or the disability service provider” (Oslund, 2014, p. 45). HEDPs must ensure campus knowledge regarding resources with a statement in professors syllabi about the availability of services (Vogel et al., 2008). It is the goal of HEDPs to help students transition with minimal issues while setting the student up for success. Beadle-Brown et al. (2015) summarized the responsibilities of HEDPs as follows:

In the US context, based on several studies, *Hewitt et al.* (2004, p. 133) concluded that “...for direct support professionals, it is the front-line manager who defines the job, provides the training, medicates the stresses, creates the culture, helps people find the personally satisfying rewards... and establishes a well-functioning work environment.” (p. 1082)

Obtaining an understanding of transition supports improves occupation performance in education and employment for students with disabilities (Berg et al., 2017). Students with ASD do not access career-related activities on campus (Briel & Getzel, 2005; Briel & Getzel, 2017; Getzel et al., 2001; Rumrill et al., 1999). Career services is a resource that most colleges offer to their students. According to Briel and Getzel (2014), students with different disabilities have varying needs and inclinations when it comes to career planning. Students with disabilities, including autism, are less likely to register with their campus career centers than their peers without disabilities, and they are unlikely to participate in career-related student or professional organizations. Consequently, they also miss out on experiential learning opportunities, such as university co-op programs or internships (Getzel et al., 2001).

Students with ASD require transition planning to support the move from high school to college. According to Roberts (2010), a potential guide for postsecondary transitions should include career exploration, academic goal setting, and preparation, assessing and identifying learning styles, self-advocacy skills, reasonable accommodations, educational supports, interagency collaboration, technology, and time management skills.

Understanding students' abilities to navigate postsecondary education helps practitioners and other providers prepare students to move beyond the societal stigma that students with disabilities are unable to succeed in postsecondary education (Berg et al., 2017). Although ASD students' needs differ widely, HEDPs share mutual goals for helping students gain independence and become functional, gainfully employed adults (Wolf et al., 2009). With growing numbers of students admitted to postsecondary institutions based on the same admission requirements used by traditional degree-seeking students, identifying ASD students can be challenging. ASD students are intelligent and capable of mastering any postsecondary program with supports, but they must disclose their disability to access accommodation at the postsecondary level. Some of their difficulties reported by HEDPs include a lack of self-advocacy skills (Zeedyk et al., 2016); a range of needs beyond typical academic concerns (Sarrett, 2018); lack of preparation for the rigor of college (Wolf et al., 2009); poor organizational and executive function skills (Wolf et al., 2009); limited study strategies (Wolf et al., 2009); social and emotional needs (Gelbar et al., 2015); and mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Sarrett, 2018).

Focusing on leadership within disability services helps with the quality of practice for communicating a shared vision, encouraging staff, developing insights, and skills for building the quality of life for students with disabilities (Beadle-Brown et al., 2015). The

*National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood*, followed students for up to eight years after high school (Roux, 2015). The findings of the study suggested that ASD students face problems transitioning into and learning to navigate the college environment (Buechler, 2017). The transition from secondary to postsecondary education can be challenging for students due to underlying issues related to the ASD student disability (Roberts, 2010). Some of the problems consist of communication, social interaction, and behavior. According to Pillay and Bhat (2012), accommodations at the secondary level are developed collaboratively with parents, the school psychologists, school, administrator, and sometimes the student. The difference between K-12 and college is that districts are required to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which provides a structure for academic accommodations and support services (Pillay & Bhat, 2012). The transition from K-12 to postsecondary can cause the student with ASD to experience challenges, which in turn places stress on the institution. With limited resources and guidelines for supporting this population, college professionals address challenges with varying degrees of success (Smith, 2007).

Students with ASD should benefit from support from enrollment through graduation (Wolf et al., 2009). Although graduation rates are increasing across the board for all students, they are also taking longer to complete their degrees (Buechler, 2017). The U.S. Department of Education (2013) reported that first-time college students' average 6-year graduation rate in 2005 ranged from 31% to 88%, depending on the institution, with a norm of 59%. Students with ASD appear on the lower end of that range, with 39% completing school (Dallas et al., 2015). With fewer graduates, this may have a direct impact on the economy. According to Wehman (2011), students with ASD that attend college increase their

likelihood of future employment and economic sustainability. To see an impact on the ASD graduation rates and increase their potential future economic impact, postsecondary institutions may need to re-evaluate existing support services and accommodations. College environments may need to be equipped to interact and understand the needs of this population. To gain independence and become functional, students need help to navigate (Wolf et al., 2009). Specifically, the HEDPs may need to examine principles, resources, and practices within their own offices. Disability Services is on college campuses across the country with various names, such as Disability Support Services. The Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) guides postsecondary disability service providers on professional behavior (i.e., Code of Ethics), which includes Professional Standards (Shaw et al., 1997). These offices authorize accommodations for students with disabilities. The role of the HEDP is to promote equal access for students with disabilities by reviewing program standards and performance indicators to meet essential expectations and demonstrate outcomes. This study will assist HEDPs with understanding how their guiding principles and the resources of the disability services offices can help students with ASD differently.

### **Statement of the Problem**

An estimated 550,000 students with ASD will be transitioning into adulthood, with 45% of these students attending college (Jackson et al., 2018). Students diagnosed with ASD experience barriers to success in post-secondary education. According to the APA (2013), the criteria for ASD include persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts. These deficits consist of social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communication, and social relationships. The APA (2013) also stated that restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior interests or activities include repetitive, adherence to routines,

fixated interests, and reactivity to sensory inputs are also behaviors of these students.

According to Camarena and Sarigiani (2009), “Students with ASD appear ‘normal’ and may have obvious talents and abilities, faculty and other students may quickly become frustrated by behaviors inherent to the disability” (p. 117). This can lead to social ostracism and adversely affect learning. According to a 2014 report from the CDC, due to the high number of children being diagnosed with ASD, they will be entering higher education. Students with ASD struggle to complete their college degree due to changes in the way education is provided and the availability of support services. The importance of incorporating postsecondary preparation and transition planning for eligible students in high school is a recognized IDEA (IDEA, 1990). This mandate protects students with disabilities.

Students with ASD are expected to follow paths like those of their peers, including attending college after high school. Attending and completing postsecondary education is an option for individuals with ASD; however, success may be contingent upon the supports provided. Understanding how to support students is necessary for educational outcomes and transition (Van Hees et al., 2015). Although, according to Roberts (2010), “success in postsecondary education for these individuals may require extensive planning and ongoing support because of underlying issues directly related to the individuals’ disabilities-specific delays in communication, social interaction, and behavior” (p. 159). Students with ASD may need academic and supportive accommodations to be successful in transitioning independently and educationally.

A student with ASD’s first year of postsecondary education may determine their subsequent achievement and retention. Students experience an increasing amount of responsibilities in colleges. They must be able to participate in group projects, access



services through disability support services offices, and communicate effectively with professors. In general, students with ASD are given little support. Although they have the potential to complete college, just like other students, research has found that students with ASD are less likely to achieve at traditional educational levels (Wiorkowski, 2015). When students are insufficiently equipped to transition into postsecondary education, their academic attainment towards persistence and retention suffers (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Most students with ASD experience difficulties unrelated to their academics. Some factors associated with this diagnosis consist of social, communicative, sensory, routine adherence, and executive functioning, all of which pose barriers for individuals with this disorder (Jackson et al., 2018). Students with ASD have limited preparation for the transition to college. However, students are knowledgeable about their transitional issues and understand how receiving assistance supports their success.

IDEA mandates a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities (Yell, 2008). This law prescribes inclusionary practices and entitlement regulations for students in K-12. Students in high school are mainstreamed for inclusion through proactive methods for accessing opportunities for a quality education while removing barriers. The goals are to meet the needs of the students by giving them opportunities to reach their full potential through mainstream inclusion. These accommodations change when students enter post-secondary education. In a higher education context, accommodations are governed by federally mandated, anti-discrimination laws, Section 504, and ADA. While these amendments have enabled students with disabilities to attend college, they are not clearly understood by professionals. “The heavy focus on academic aspects of the curriculum and the demand for data-driven accountability that schools are required to address often result in

the focus on social and emotional learning and mental health being overshadowed or pushed to one side” (Saggers et al., 2016, p. 1). Transition planning should start early due to self-advocacy requirements for students that include self-disclosure with limited parental involvement.

Due to their disability being invisible, students with ASD often battle the stigma of requiring extra assistance. Additionally, most students with ASD have difficulties with communication, which may be a significant challenge (Hadley & Addison, 2016). In secondary education, teachers are aware of students with differential needs, and special education is more normalized. The gap between support structures available in high school and the expectations of self-advocacy in college creates the need for a bridge to help students develop independence (Murray, 2015). Students are given more accommodations and leeway in high school, which is not available in college. Most higher education institutions have standardized accommodations for disabilities; however, colleges and secondary institutions do not work currently together to bridge the gaps for students.

Some students with disabilities may require education about available resources to facilitate their transition, academically, and socially (Zeedyk et al., 2016). Information should be updated and not based on assessments, such as a clinical and psychoeducational tests, to determine reasonable academic accommodations. HEDPs play a crucial role during this time of transition. Some students with ASD might assume that they will automatically receive the same services and accommodations from secondary education when transitioning to college (Hammond, 2014). HEDPs are in an excellent position to be able to assist students with ASD in the completion of a successful transition from secondary education.

There is confusion about the differences between secondary and postsecondary accommodations among parents, students, and educators. Students with disabilities make up 10% of all students enrolled in institutions of higher education across the country, but there is limited research on their needs and experiences (Pena, 2014). According to Hewitt (2011), the five keys to college success include active involvement, social skills, and academic supports, along with accommodations for health conditions and disabilities.

Students are required to disclose any disabilities to be eligible to receive accommodations in college. Examples of accommodations include scanned textbooks, alternative testing arrangements (such as extended time with a separate location), interpreters, note-takers, adapted classroom equipment, large print, oral readers, braille, scribe, frequent breaks, and proctors. Students must be advocates for their education, and most colleges offer resources to students with various learning needs (Hammond, 2014). When students learn to navigate life in college, they have better college experiences (Hammond, 2014).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to gather perceptions from HEDPs about students with ASD when transitioning to college. According to Zager et al. (2012), there are a couple of crucial areas that help students with ASD transition successfully. Adreaon and Durocher (2007) suggest identifying issues for students transitioning to postsecondary education, such as focusing on self-determination, self-management skills, living arrangements, self-advocacy, self-awareness, and size and type of college are essential as well as intertwined for supporting students academically. HEDPs must be trained to facilitate the college transition process for students with ASD. A crucial first step for the HEDPs is to build a relationship

with the student at the beginning of the transition process (Roberts, 2011). Additionally, secondary professionals understand how to develop reports that outline accommodations that reflect the support needed to be successful in postsecondary education. Moreover, recommended accommodations should ensure that individual students meet the eligibility requirements set forth by postsecondary institutions for accommodations such as intervention, peer support, and collaborative instructional practices.

The information collected in this study was used to inform HEDPs about transitional strategies for students with ASD in their university. Ideally, the findings from this study will help disability services offices, as well as faculty and educational support professionals, identify effective practices for meeting the diverse needs of students on the autism spectrum. This study described and evaluated accommodations that are currently available to students with ASD and the supports that are required. The study reviewed available supports for the social, academic, mental health, and general well-being of students with ASD, as well as other forms of assistance with daily living skills.

This research may also assist universities with developing tools for educating and retaining students with ASD, as well as with helping these students build social development skills. Most research concerns the treatment and support for early childhood education to improve students' outcomes, while the success of students as independent adults has mainly been unexamined (Buechler, 2017). Considering the substantial number of students with ASD expected to enroll in post-secondary education in the coming years, university disability offices may need to offer services beyond traditional academic accommodations (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). Such broader support should seek to remove the stigmas around supporting students with ASD. This research may assist disability advisors in helping

students who require more individualized supports by identifying inclusive practices for the elimination of barriers that affect the academic success of students with ASD.

Overall, the purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how HEDPs perceive the barriers of supports received by students with ASD preparing to transition to college. The insights gleaned from this study may help higher education and high school HEDPs identify and eliminate potential challenges students with ASD face when transitioning to college. These bridge supports may help to decrease students' experience of isolation and feelings of nervousness surrounding disclosure. These supports include students with accommodations early in the process while providing unique resources to help students succeed by eliminating barriers outside of those addressed by traditional accommodations (Hammond, 2014).

### **Significance of the Study**

Preparedness for the transition to postsecondary education plays a critical role for students navigating a new educational environment. This study examined how HEDPs, who have working relationships with students with ASD, view the implementation of accommodations aimed at improving these students' academic achievement and graduation within higher and postsecondary education. Although research exists, it is limiting on experiences and perspectives of HEDPs and other support staff. This study seeks to increase awareness of support gaps in students' transition from secondary to postsecondary institutions, highlighting areas of opportunity for collaboration. This study assessed the specific accommodations and modifications that students with ASD are receiving beyond those recommended as reasonable according to the ADA guidelines. Additionally, a robust

system of transitional supports assists professionals in matching students' accommodations to their specific needs (Hsiao et al., 2018).

Students with ASD are no longer rare in higher education, and their numbers will continue to increase (Rutter, 2005). HEDPs are aware that students with ASD have unique needs and require useful supports and accommodations. Updated methods and innovative technology help these professionals develop new approaches for supporting students with ASD, who are working with disability support offices.

### **Research Questions**

To accomplish the objectives of this research, I utilized questions to guide the design and collection of data. This study analyzed the perceptions of practices of HEDPs, posing the following primary question: What is higher education disability professionals' perceptions of the K-12 to postsecondary transition experiences of students with autism spectrum disorders?

Sub-research questions are as follows:

1. What factors contribute to the retention of first-year college students with ASD?
2. What are the barriers for freshmen students with ASD?
3. What are the gaps in support services for students with ASD transitioning from high school to college?
4. What services and support systems do students with ASD need to help them succeed during their first year in college?
5. What factors contribute to successful degree completion and attainment by students with ASD?

### **Research Design**

Using a qualitative study method is most appropriate for this study. It allowed for an understanding of how organizations operate and why people interact the way they do. This study enabled me to review problems and social issues through a different lens, focusing on data and providing a framework to conduct analysis. This study represented 14 Michigan public universities with interviews among 13 HEDPs. These professionals work in disability support offices at public institutions. In addition, these professionals are aware of some of the barriers affecting students with ASD and college completion among students registered within their centers. This study expanded beyond the confines of a single institutional approach to servicing students with ASD. Dismantling the stories of failure by postsecondary institutions, moving more towards helping students with ASD universally. This study utilized multiple sites (up to 14 public universities in Michigan) to provide various perspectives.

This phenomenological study focused on the lived experiences of HEDPs. A phenomenological design focused on 5 to 25 interviews to build common, valid findings of participants (Creswell, 2013). According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology details what the participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. Interpretations of events, issues, and problems prioritize the perspectives of participants with this qualitative method, according to Creswell (2013). Investigating the views of higher education professionals allowed for scholarly inquiry from staff working with students with ASD regularly. Although this approach raises awareness and increases insight into a phenomenon, it will not provide definitive explanations (Patton, 1999). This study attempted to describe and explore experiences by collecting data from HEDPs who have lived the encounters themselves with the students. A constructivist and pragmatic approach through an epistemological role as a

researcher allowed for the knowledge about students with ASD's methodology to come from a variety of sources. The outcomes of this design are interpretive and exploratory, according to Creswell (2003). Attempts of this study to understand how HEDPs perceive transitional issues for freshmen students in college may be challenging to obtain through conventional, quantitative studies.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The transition process for students with ASD can be stressful. This study built upon transformative worldview inquiry (Creswell, 2014), disability theory (Barnes, 2003), organizational theory (Simon, 1997), and critical race theory (Connor et al., 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Disability and critical race theory form Driscrit (Connor, Ferri, and Annamma, 2016). These theories are the theoretical frameworks used in this study. The focus is to examine whether the ideologies and constructs interact with the perceptions of HEDP's emphasizing ability.

The transformative worldview was utilized for this study. This framework shapes approaches to inquiry and is drawn from the work of Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, and Freire (Creswell, 2014). The principle of transformative analysis is bringing about practices, which results in an action plan for change. The premise of knowledge is not neutral; social relationships with society are reflected in the information gained, which helps people advance culture (Creswell, 2013). These issues can be entwined with political agendas and politics (Creswell, 2013). Throughout this research, frames from the voices of the participants were heard with plans for framing thinking to assist with change within leadership practices. The objective is to create a discussion that leads to change, which is the underlying motivation for this transformative model (Creswell, 2013).



According to Barnes (2003), disability theory examines the meaning and consequences of a disability. A disability is considered a civil rights issue with laws that govern protection. A movement has emerged in the disability community, which contains neurodiversity and critical race theory. Disability was once approached in terms of the medical model. The reduction of symptoms and the elimination of conditions are associated with the medical model due to the deficits that are said to cause functional impairment (Kapp et al., 2013). This medical model views autism as a disease, whereas the social model of disability adopts a neurodiversity lens (Kapp et al., 2013). The movement of neurodiversity provides a culture of pride for individuals with autism and support for self-advocacy while viewing the strengths and weaknesses identified with autism. According to Cole-Runswick (2014), most proponents are moving away from using autism; they are using neurodiverse or neurotypical.

Critical race theory has been used for decades (Bell, 1976) to study legal and educational issues of race and inequalities in education. Students with disabilities often experience intersectionality because of their race, class, and gender. Using the lens of critical race theory allowed me to illuminate the hidden biases within the intersecting identities of students with ASD.

According to Seibers (2010), disability theory examines the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity. It requires the removal of social and built environments, which affects systems for change. The goal is to examine the positive values that students with ASD bring to society with the purpose of not labeling the individual. Being mindful of the human condition of ableism to help all students with ASD succeed. Disability theory looks at ASD students as a minority identity (Seibers, 2010). There are

more opportunities for students with a disability than in the past. This theory informs and underpins practice while explaining and providing insight into a situation that may occur in day to day practice. Legislation influences how services are provided to students with disabilities and the resources that are available and financial expenditures. Social and personal pressures epitomize issues of independence and productivity for both HEDPs and students with ASD. A clear understanding of situations develops a relationship for knowledge that provides one-sidedness.

Organizational theory looks at the culture of the group (Argyris, 2010). University professionals can create a caring organization, which can arise from the cultures of students and their communities. Tapping into the HEDPs' perceptions of support and transition for students with ASD informs the university leaders, higher education institutions, students, and families who struggle to support students with ASD. It also provides a platform for accommodations that are working among other colleges. I believe that an organization's structure rises from the culture, and Disability Offices create the culture of the school. Simon (1997) described the organizational implementation theory as structures used to meet a need or collective goal (Eacott, 2018). This theory is essential due to the research focusing on HEDPs in disability offices. These individuals make all the decisions for the accommodations that students receive. Organizational theory looks at the quality of staff practice and the outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

The underlying goal for choosing a transformative framework is to help improve academic success for students with ASD, encourage faculty and staff to be more flexible with their teaching pedagogy due to various learning styles, and motivate students with ASD to engage in active learning. This study brought not only an understanding of concerns and

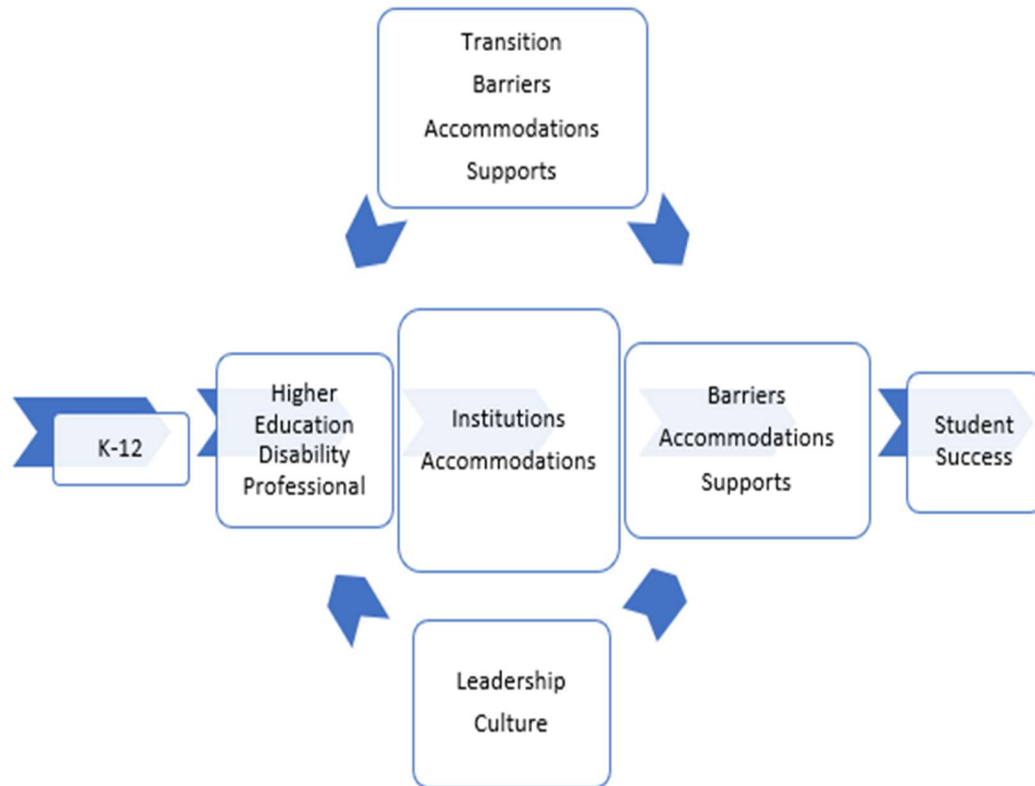
challenges that students and universities face in educating students that are different, but it also allowed the researcher to be a voice for students, professors, and disability specialists affected by some of these issues. Personal experiences, practical pedagogical suggestions, and available technology and resources may improve accommodations for students with disabilities that may not modify classroom policies and procedures (Hsiao et al., 2017). A goal for working to maintain persistence for students with ASD.

### **Conceptual Model Map**

Figure 2 shows the conceptual framework map for this study. This framework provides a visual explanation of the coherence of the literature within this study and the connections between streams and topics.

Figure 2

*Student Transition Journey as an ASD Student in Higher Education,*



The conceptual model provides an overview of my interpretation of the journey that a student with ASD goes through to reach student success (or graduation) from a post-secondary institution. The model suggests that the journey begins in K-12, and enters higher education to meet ad HEDP, who then frames the supports for the student. These supports are lenses in which the HEDP frames support, including the institution's accommodations, resources, leadership policies, and institutional culture. In addition, the HEDP frames the work with the students through their own lived experiences and perceptions. As the student moves through the organizational construct, the journey to student success may include barriers, accommodations, and supports.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Several boundaries limit the scope of this inquiry. In this study, 14 Michigan public universities HEDPs serve as the source and site for data collection. I currently work as a disability services specialist in a disability support office at a 4-year public university. Researcher bias may include but is not limited to, approaches to accommodations, implementation, experiences, or institutional policy through the lens of HEDPs in a public 4-year institution.

Additionally, disability support offices vary in how closely they tie accommodations to meet and exceed ADA guidelines. This study used qualitative research methods and practices to provide knowledge and understanding that may be transferred within contexts. Also, this research was conducted and interpreted in disability support offices at these state universities where the study was performed. An additional limitation that fell outside the purview of this study is whether student retention may itself be influenced by the relationship between the student and the disability office professional that a student encounters. In addition to bias, the ability of HEDPs and participants in the sample population to tie accommodations to ADA guidelines and institutional resources may be limited by their understanding, skills, and abilities. By using qualitative research methods and practice, my ability to interpret participant perceptions is critical and could limit the study. Finally, relationships between students and HEDPs could influence services and success by students with ASD. I endeavored to limit my bias through research-based methods such as journaling and attempts to triangulate results.

This study focuses on HEDPs perceptions of the barriers to student success at the postsecondary level. This study may be impacted by the opinions of HEDP practitioners to

identify support strategies and gaps for students with ASD. The goal of this study is to help Disability Services professionals explore and develop effective accommodation strategies to help students be successful.

The philosophical assumptions of the researcher role are rooted in an epistemological approach. According to Creswell (1998), researchers must attempt to lessen the distance between themselves and the research. The researcher serves in the role of HEDP professional. Epistemology refers to the way that knowledge claims are justified through observation, testimony, intuition, and other methods (Barnard, 2007). Epistemology is the logic and reasoning with ethics of the wrong and right. Due to the confidentiality of the HEDPs, this is important for this study. Derived from the noun “*phenomenon*,” *phenomenology* means a fact, an appearance, or an event in nature or society that is not fully understood (Abakpa et al., 2017). Most of the testimonies were from both observations and lived experiences working with students with disabilities. Phenomenology is the study of lived experience and how it is experienced (Smith, 2006).

According to Creswell (2012), the researcher will use empirical knowledge to determine the validity and reliability of the information gathered. For example, limited research has examined how to best support students with ASD in academics and social success (White et al., 2017). Students with ASD experience challenges in college if accommodations are not approved at the beginning of the semester. They may struggle with both the delivery of academic course content and the availability of support services. According to Jackson et al. (2018), non-academic issues seem to be the underlying issues preventing students with ASD from degree completion. Students with ASD have cognitive abilities for success in college. They need to disclose their disability, and they should use all

supports available (Anderson et al., 2017). Students have better life outcomes if they complete post-secondary education, and most students want to attend college after graduation (Anderson et al., 2017). Most research on students with ASD is qualitative. It focuses on problems with critical thinking and communication as such students often fail to grasp the implications of some kinds of questions. According to Hadley and Addison (2016), students must self-advocate and request reasonable accommodations; however, accommodations are not the same for all students. Students with ASD can also become self-absorbed with limited ability to communicate and interact with others. An essential consideration for transition is whether HEDPs cultivate positive beliefs and experiences towards the post-secondary achievement for students with ASD (Kelly & Joseph, 2012).

Students with ASD experience challenges in college, and disability service professionals may be the best source for what services and resources work to improve their persistence (Dymond et al., 2017). This study enriches our understanding of the psychological, social, and educational struggles that may affect students with ASD in post-secondary education by introducing the perspective of the disability services professional assisting with accommodations for students with ASD.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Accommodation:** An adjustment to the learning environment for a student with a disability to gain access to the content or complete assignments in a regular course.

**Accommodations:** extended time, frequent breaks, note-takers

**Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):** Civil rights law of 1963 prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the public.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD): A neurodevelopmental disorder that impacts how an individual perceives or interacts with others, causing issues with social communication interaction. This disorder often includes limited and repetitive patterns of behavior.

Daily living: A student's ability to manage personal needs independently while attending courses to help build sustainability.

Disability support offices: An office in most colleges that provides academic accommodations for students with a documented and disclosed disability.

First-year: Student's first year of attending college after high school graduation or equivalent.

First time in any college (FTIAC): A student is attending college for the first time.

Freshman: A student that has never taken college courses at a four-year institution.

Higher education disability professionals (HEDPs): Advisors that create accommodations and review all documentation to help meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A public school legal document for children receiving special education services during K-12. This document explains the accommodations that are required to comply with IDEA.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): A 1997 law which ensures that students with a disability receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), according to the United States Department of Education in 2017.

Invisible disability: A disability not easily perceptible, and you would not know the individual has a disability such as autism or attention deficit disorder (ADD).



K-12: Prior schooling before entering college. The K-12 academic levels for students with ASD, from the beginning of kindergarten through 12th grade, before entering college after graduation.

Persistence: A continuation of college courses from one semester to the next.

Postsecondary education: Any education after high school, includes, but is not limited to, a 4 year or 2-year educational institution that grants degrees.

Retention: Continuation in a program with supports.

Reasonable accommodations: An accommodations that does not change the pedagogy of the course or the regular business of the institutions.

Secondary education: Middle school and high school and precedes postsecondary education.

Social skills: Flexible skills that can be adjusted in messaging, thoughts, or feelings.

Special education: A method in secondary education used for educating students to address their individual needs or differences, also known as special ed. or SPED.

Successful: Completing a purpose or reaching a goal, strategy, or initiative.

Transition: Moving from a secondary educational institution to a postsecondary educational institution.

Visible Disability: A disability that is easily perceptible, such as most disabilities having to do with mobility.

### **Summary**

Most students with ASD are intelligent and articulate (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). These skills may hide challenges that have the potential to hinder their process of obtaining a degree within postsecondary education. Data was collected using primarily face-to-face interviews and analyzing emerging patterns and themes that culminated in a creative

synthesis of perceptions from HEDPs. This study was focused on the student with ASD's transition between high school and a postsecondary institution and the resources provided. HEDPs perceptions were gathered on the successes, challenges, or gaps experienced by students with ASD during the life-altering transition from K-12 to postsecondary education. Chapter 1 was an outline of the introduction, statement of the problem, the conceptual framework for the study, the purpose of the study, research questions, the definition of terms, procedures, the significance of the study, limitations of the study, and organization of the study with an explanation.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Chapter 2 is a literature review that examines research on the laws, challenges, accommodations, and resources available to support students with ASD. Also, this chapter explores disability theory (Barnes, 2003; Denhart, 2008) and organization theory (Simon, 1997) to connect postsecondary institutional models to success. This chapter orients the reader to a qualitative study that explored how higher education disability professionals view the processes and support available to students with ASD in postsecondary education. One of the goals of this research is to close the perceived gaps that affect successful transition for students with ASD in higher education. Van Hees et al. (2015) acknowledged five challenges identified by former college students:

1. Struggling with new situations and unexpected changes: Students reported difficulty in handling a large amount of new information and choices in college, as well as difficulty with the lack of structure and predictability.
2. Exhausting but necessary social contacts: Students reported that they realized how important social contacts were but had difficulty making social contacts and participating in group projects in class.
3. Processing information and time management: Students reported difficulty with time management and with experiencing sensory overload.
4. Doubts about disclosure: Students expressed concerns about how others would understand their ASD and whether they should disclose their disability to the university disability services offices.

5. Mental health issues: Students described feelings of being overwhelmed, anxious, and depressed that impacted all aspects of their life (Kuder & Accardo, 2018).

Administrators and professionals in higher education document the success of students with ASD in college (Hart et al., 2010). Such documentation is necessary due to accountability planning and for the required evaluation for articulating service delivery for students in high school and post-secondary education. According to Yampolskaya et al. (2004), documenting specific interventions that help demonstrate the effectiveness of supports offered is becoming a requirement for service providers. While relatively little is known about the transition process for individuals with ASD, the available information points to the needs and experiences of students with disabilities. It builds on their academic success (Adreon & Durocher, 2007).

Students in postsecondary education are required to exercise learning independence, but students with ASD often struggle to communicate their academic needs (Ackles et al., 2013). Transitioning to postsecondary can be difficult for any student, but having a disability makes the experience even harder (Locks et al., 2008). Thirty-eight percent of college students with autism will graduate from postsecondary education (Newman et al., 2011; VanBergeijk et al., 2008). Osland (2014) reported that an individual must disclose their disability without being pressured to do so. According to VanBergeijk et al. (2008), students with ASD achieve academically at the same or above the levels of their peers and would possibly succeed with appropriate supports. Some of the issues for students with ASD may exist among professionals in higher education and their guidance on working with students with ASD (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). According to Wolf et al. (2009), professionals working with students with ASD do not see themselves as experts and require special training to assist

this population. Training first starts with understanding autism and the individuals diagnosed with this disorder enrolled in institutions of higher education.

### **Overview of “Autism”**

The word “autism” was first used in 1908 by psychiatrist Eugene Bleuler (2014), who also coined the word “schizophrenic” (Kuhn & Cahn, 2004). The term *autism* is derived from the Greek *autos*, meaning self and *autism*, which means morbid self-admiration and withdrawal into the person (Mandal, 2019). In 1943, Leo Kanner, M.D, published a paper discussing 11 children who were highly intelligent and displayed a desire for aloneness and an obsessive insistence on persistent sameness (Kanner, 1971). Kanner named the condition early *infantile autism*. In 1944, a German scientist by the name of Hans Asperger identified a milder form of autism that became known as Asperger’s syndrome (Furfaro, 2018). In 1967, a psychologist named Bruno Bettelheim theorized that “refrigerator mothers” caused autism by not loving their children (King, 2008). Bettelheim’s theory was disproven entirely in 1977 when research on twins showed that autism is caused by genetics and a biological difference in brain development (Bailey et al.,1995). The condition was separated from childhood schizophrenia and infantile autism and listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* in 1980. In 1987, infantile autism was removed from the DSM in favor of a more expansive entry under *autism disorder*, which included a checklist of diagnostic criteria (Ramachandran, 2016).

In 1988, the movie *Rain Man*, starring Dustin Hoffman, brought public awareness to the disorder through its sympathetic portrayal of an autistic thinker with a photographic memory (Donnelly & Altman, 1994). Several events occurred that impacted the definition and diagnosis of autism. With the success of the movie, social thought on autism was

changed, and in 1991, the government made autism an education category. This, in turn, helped public schools identify students on the autism spectrum and provide them with accommodations. In 1994, faced with a wide range of severity, autism was redefined by the DSM to include Asperger's, which included milder cases with more high-functioning individuals (Houston & Frith, 2000). Then, after a researcher published findings in the *Lancet* that drew a connection between the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism, manufacturers removed all immunizations with mercury-based preservatives due to public fears.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated in 2007 that 1 in 110 to 1 in 150 children was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders due to improved screening. The *DSM-5* changed all the subcategories and placed the diagnosis of ASD under one umbrella with Asperger's syndrome no longer recognized as a separate condition (Lobar, 2016). Impaired social communication and interaction with restricted or repetitive behaviors are the two categories for ASD. The CDC reported in 2016 that 1 in 68 children across all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups was diagnosed with ASD, more boys than girls. However, the CDC reported in 2018 that the prevalence of autism increased to 1 in 59, while tracking 11 communities with half receiving their first diagnosis by the age of four years old.

Most individuals diagnosed with autism are either considered "high functioning" (HFA) or "low functioning" (LFA; Jansiewicz et al. 2006). Those that are normal are those that are regarded as high functioning. The *DSM-5* does not use these deviations, but they are commonly used by teachers and diagnosing practitioners. These designations can be confusing and cause miscommunication due to problems inherent in the words. They are

widely used by people who do not have autism to describe people who are diagnosed with the disorder.

### **Historical and Legal Overview of Disability Services in Higher Education**

Students with disabilities are attending college with a significant amount of legislation. These laws have afforded students with disabilities to pursue higher education with additional supports. The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008 (Public Law 110-315), which was reauthorized from the Higher Education Act of 1965, allows students with disabilities to have more opportunities to attend postsecondary education with financial assistance. This was not the case in the past for students with significant disabilities. The law expanded the terminology of intellectual disability to apply to students and improved access for students interested in postsecondary education.

The first law enacted to protect the rights of minorities and other underrepresented students in education was the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The bill, the nation's top civil rights legislation, outlaws discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin and requires equal access to public places and employment. It also enforced the desegregation of schools and the right to vote (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2011) The Civil Rights Act of 1964 did not specify protections for individuals with disabilities; an omission remedied in 1973 with the Rehabilitation Act, Section 504. This was the first civil rights law that prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in programs that receive federal financial assistance. After this law, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was created to guarantee a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for every child with a disability in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Later came the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990) and The Americans with Disabilities Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). IDEA replaced the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 and included Individual Education Programs (IEPs). This law directed that all students with disabilities be provided services in elementary and secondary education, encouraging effective and inclusive schools for all students. “The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) is a Civil Rights Law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the public” (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2011). ADA included postsecondary education and K-12 schools for students with disabilities. Guarantees of equal opportunity in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications fall under the ADA ” (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2011). In 2008, the creation of the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) was endorsed and became effective in 2009. The ADAAA (2008) significantly expanded the purview of the fundamental law by broadening the scope of protection ” (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2011).

### **K-12**

Students with ASD in K-12 education are legally entitled to special education services under IDEA (P.L. 105-17) through an IEP or under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 through a 504 plan (Hamblet, 2017). Other legal parameters in K-12 may influence guaranteed evaluation, remediation, and accommodation of impairments (Wolf et al., 2009). The involvement of securing accommodations is based on the participation of a



team consisting of parents, education providers, and sometimes the student. To meet the specific needs of students with ASD, an IEP is created to assist with providing FAPE (Hamblet, 2017). The goal is to improve students' educational results and ensure that educational standards are met. Most services and structures are similar for most students diagnosed with ASD in K-12.

According to Parker-Moore (2006), K-12 has done a much better job appreciating at-risk students since No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002). Parker-Moore's study on educator perceptions of school improvement since No Child Left Behind spotlighted the K-12 changes in the treatment of students in special education. In educational contexts, protections are based on the type of disability and available accommodations (Eichhorn, 1997). Disability access in secondary education is governed by IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and ADA. These laws exist to ensure that all students with disabilities have a FAPE, including special education and IDEA. Students with a disability are eligible from 0 through 21 years of age, as defined by the state Administrative Rules for Special Education and ADA (Martin et al., 1996). Professionally trained staff in the school district provide documentation identifying that the student has a disability and prescribing special instruction services as well as furnished accommodations (Weber, 2009). Advocacy for students with disabilities usually is undertaken by the parents and teachers alongside the student.

### **Postsecondary**

In college, IEPs or 504 plans do not automatically transfer to college (Hamblet, 2017). Protections shift from entitlement and remediation to protection from discrimination and equal access (Wolf et al., 2009). The shift falls under civil rights protection laws consisting of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, ADA Amendments Act of

2008, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Students must self-advocate for accommodations. Under FERPA, students' rights to confidentiality are protected. Students over the age of 18 are considered adults in college. Information regarding grades, attendance, medical records, or any data from faculty is deemed to be confidential (Duggan, 2018). Students must give written permission for any information to be shared. Privacy is essential, and colleges take confidentiality seriously (Duggan, 2018). According to Hendrickson et al. (2017), parents play an indispensable role in students transitioning to postsecondary education. Positive expectations from parents help ASD students seeking post-secondary education (Hendrickson et al., 2017). Dr. Sabrina Robins (personal communication, December 23, 2019), a parent advocate, commented on the importance of the parental role in supporting ASD students in this transition. ASD college students need the assistance of their parents to have executive functioning, social cues, and life skill development, according to Dr Robins (2019). Parents are an essential partner in the development of transition support services. More is required to help parents with the ASD teenager to build a bridge of targeted support from high school to college Geller, L. L., & Greenberg, M. (2009). Many Completely shutting out parents ignores a reality that parental guidance is part of the successful completion of college and workforce readiness ( Bridgeland, DiIulio, Streeter & Mason, 2008). Modeling flexible resource networks for ASD college students is essential for increasing retention. Parental involvement is critical for transition success.

Colleges have higher expectations and less structure than high schools, and the combination of these two factors can be especially harsh for students who struggle with planning and time management. In high school, accommodations are involuntary, but in college, accommodations are voluntary (Wolf et al., 2009). In postsecondary education,

students must confidentially disclose their disability to receive accommodations. Students must advocate for accommodation through their disability services office (Gil, 2007).

Although a student received accommodations in high school, they are not automatically accommodated in college. Students must have a documented disability. The purpose of requiring this self-advocacy is to make sure that programs or services do not discriminate against students with disabilities (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Students first obtain documentation of their disability from a qualified professional; this documentation is limited to one or more life events. Accommodations are reasonable and should not cause undue hardship to the university. Students are self-advocates for their needs and responsible for discussing modifications with appropriate staff (Gil, 2007).

Students with ASD may need individualized assistance based on their vision and goals (Hammond, 2014). Though college is not ideal for all students with ASD, many students with milder ASD symptoms may thrive in the less controlled educational environments typically found in higher education (Keen et al., 2016). Even so, colleges must be prepared to meet the needs of all students. Some students with ASD require environments designed to meet sensory needs, and faculty need training on how to interact with them and help them build their social skills as well as to challenge them.

Faculty and staff are not necessarily trained to support students whose disabilities make these aspects of the transition difficult, and colleges should be aware that students transitioning from high school to college require support beyond the classroom (Barnhill et al., 2000). For disability services professionals, developing accommodations plans require creativity, detailed analysis, innovation, and collaboration. Disability services professionals

must have a clear understanding of the unique culture, curriculum, and various requirements of programs, as well as a sense of some of the nuances of different disabilities.

According to the National Center for Special Education Research (2015), 55% of individuals with disabilities reported continuing to college. Autism Spectrum Australia (2012) found that the negative experiences of students in high school impacted their academic achievement, as well as in their future outcomes, in tertiary education and the workplace (Keen et al., 2016). Students with ASD are transitioning from high schools where they had ready access to both their families and medical support services nearby. This can have varying effects on student success, depending on their transition experience.

Jansen et al. (2017) interviewed students, counselors, and students without disabilities and found that students with ASD had problems with verbal and non-verbal communication, difficulties handling change, and difficulties identifying relevant information in the text. Similarly, disability professionals reported that students with ASD have issues with planning and organizing, social interaction, and feelings of stress. Students without disabilities reported fewer difficulties than those with ASD in most areas, apart from planning coordination and applying learning strategies (Kuder & Accardo, 2018).

Academic and social success is determined in part by accommodations provided in secondary education for preparation for college. In K-12, students receive individualized accommodations, while postsecondary institutions accommodate students with ASD as they would for any student with a disability. According to the CDC (2018), there are 1 in 59 children diagnosed with ASD, which increased from 1 in 88 (CDC, 2012). This tells us that more students will be exiting high school and planning for adulthood. It is unclear why there are considerable differences in accommodations after high school, although the

accommodations must be reasonable. While the accommodations allow the student to access the curriculum entirely, other factors also contribute to student success (Hamlet, 2017).

Success, in this context, might be defined as a sense of empowerment from knowing that the resources and accommodations are helping in the classroom.

Studies have proven that students with disabilities fall behind and have poorer outcomes than those without disabilities (Cox et al., 2017). College students with disabilities do not graduate at levels commensurate with students who do not have disabilities; although, federal legislation mandates equal access to postsecondary education through reasonable accommodations for qualified students with disabilities (Zhang et al., 2010).

Many students with autism have reasonable expectations for access to and success in postsecondary education (Cox et al., 2017). All students with a disability leaving secondary education should have an IEP. This transitional plan aims to improve the outcomes of those with disabilities as they move from high school to postsecondary education, employment, and independent living. Secondary education is usually measurable and addresses a clear path for the student to facilitate their transition into college with a focus on academic and functional achievement while considering the strengths, interests, and preferences of the student. The plan is developed by a team, which may or may not include the student, family, educators, and transition specialist (Ekes & Ochoa, 2005). The IEP is individualized for the needs of the student, and the overall structure of the services. Under IDEA, students with disabilities have rights and protections with inclusions of parents and guardians (Taylor, 2011). This structure does not exist in postsecondary education.

The prevailing determinate of success for students in the American-unique education system is attendance (Duggan, 2018). Students are clustered into resource classrooms with

levels of functioning, which is wide-ranging, with students that are mainstreamed in traditional classes receiving breaks (Duggan, 2018). Students receive extra credit, and teachers are more lenient with grading (Duggan, 2018). In college, exams are the primary determinate for students, and extra credit is not an option. Students are expected to perform like any other student within the classroom.

In postsecondary education, accommodations are not individualized, and adjustments are provided to create for an equal academic opportunity. Students must endure the same academic standards as nondisabled students (Daniel, 2008), without change to instruction or curriculum. Students must disclose their disability and the differences that exist among limitations that impact personal success. An understanding of the barriers that hinder students early can prevent disastrous outcomes for students with disabilities. Some possible reasons for these graduation disparities are the unpreparedness of students and higher education institutions to provide appropriate educational accommodations (White et al., 2016).

Diagnosis of ASD is growing at an unprecedented rate among young adults, with many students graduating from secondary school and transitioning to higher education. Most students with ASD are dually diagnosed with a learning disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or attention deficit disorder (ADD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), psychiatric disorders (PS), or chronic conditions (CC) (Luiselli, 2014). Most information obtained on students with ASD's transition before 2008 came from anecdotal accounts (Torres, 2009). Authors such as Torres (2009) used personal interactions with postsecondary students with ASD to inform practices regarding the provision of reasonable accommodations. Torres identified factors which include the disability professional's knowledge of legal requirements, attitudes regarding students with disabilities, perceptions of

institutional support, and level of comfort interacting with individuals with disabilities. There is limited research on specific transition issues faced by students with ASD; however, Kuder and Accardo (2017) reported studies listing the difficulties for ASD students:

Although there has been an increase in research on the challenges faced by students with ASD in higher education settings and on the support services that are provided for these students, the research has been limited both in scope and design. Most of the research consists of case studies. In their reviews, Gelbar et al. (2014) found only two experimental studies. Barnhill (2016) found that almost no institutions of higher education in her study were collecting data on outcomes of the services and supports provided to students with ASD. Similarly, Zeedyk et al. (2016) found that university programs and supports being used for students with ASD are lacking a research foundation, noting a need for a database of academic and social supports to enhance college success. (p. 724)

Attending postsecondary education and securing employment are social role transitions for American youth. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), 66% of high school graduates enrolled in college (Kena et al., 2015). Approximately 50,000 students with ASD turn eighteen years of age each year (Koehler, 2018). Although they have the intellectual abilities to earn an advanced degree, they are less likely to enroll in postsecondary education than their peers with other types of disabilities. White et al. (2016) stated:

Whereas most (approximately 59%) of non-disabled students who enroll in four-year colleges ultimately graduate with a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), only about 41% of individuals with a disability, including ASD,

graduate (Newman et al., 2011) from a bachelor's granting institution. At this time, no reports on college graduation rates for students with ASD specifically have been published. (p. 30)

ASD students may cause enrollment increases in postsecondary institutions due to the intellectual abilities of these students.

“While students with ASD are increasingly likely to enter postsecondary education, many of them are unprepared for either higher education or gainful employment, which can adversely affect their quality of life and ability to live” (White et al., 2016, p. 29).

Institutions continue to struggle with ASD students and their transition to college.

Understanding the experiences of college students with ASD has provided minimal data on effective practices that improve outcomes (Kuder & Accardo, 2017). According to Kuder and Accardo (2017), a study by Smith (2007) found that higher education institutions were using the same services and accommodations that were developed for other students with disabilities other than ASD. There were no individual supports that went beyond what was offered to the general population of students with disabilities registered in disability offices.

A review of the existing literature suggests a need for further research to describe firsthand accounts of college students with ASD lived experiences. Studies are just beginning to examine how the specific struggles of students with ASD in higher education affect success. Between 2012 and 2017, eight studies were conducted to review programs and services, including cognitive and behavioral interventions, social communication instruction, the transition to college, and evaluation of a variety of widely used accommodations (Kuder & Accardo, 2018). A study by Cai and Richdale (2016) recognized issues that impacted the college experience of ASD students, such as social-communication difficulties and problems



with handling the lack of structure and routine in college. These sensory sensitivities affected the ability of some students to maintain their focus and led to co-morbid conditions such as anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder, and executive functioning difficulties, such as a lack of organization and complexity with fine-motor skills that affected writing (Cai & Richdale, 2016).

### **Parental Involvement**

Parental involvement in postsecondary education is essential. In Barnhill (2014), Carmarena and Sarigian (2009), Morrison et al. (2009), and Schlaback (2008), parental involvement was a theme in their research. Barnhill (2014) reported that parental involvement was viewed at some institutions positively. Some of their supports consisted of emails and progress reports for partnerships for helping the student's academic success. Carmarena and Sarigian (2009) found that parents were viewed as non-academic support for their child in postsecondary education. Morrison et al. (2009) mentioned that parental involvement included assistance with living skills. Schlaback (2008) reported that students and staff in Disability Offices asserted that parents were advocates for their students and provided social coaching and communication issues. Students with ASD have had the assistance of their parents throughout their childhood. As students with ASD transition to college, they are forced to be an adult. Although, this milestone is a learning process for some students. Students with ASD struggle more with change and limited support in areas related to daily living activities (Dallas et al., 2015). Parent involvement in college was highly cautioned due to the need for students to be independent (Dallas et al., 2015). Most parents assist their adult children in the postsecondary environment to ensure success with college completion and independence. According to Eckes and Ochoa (2005), one factor

involved in favorable later outcomes in an educational setting for students with ASD is parent involvement in the transition from secondary to postsecondary education (Elias & White, 2017). Using parents as informants for information might be helpful for HEDPs working with students with ASD. According to a study by Duke et al. (2013), prominent challenges such as time-management, self-determination, social isolation, and self-regulation may make arrangements by parents (Elia & White, 2017). Parental involvement is reported to be beneficial; however, the roles may need to be specific.

### **Leadership**

Numerous studies have reported on the knowledge, and lack thereof, on meeting the needs of students with this disorder (Ligon, 2016). Leaders have a moral, legal, and organizational responsibility to serve students with disabilities. Lack of training on assisting students with ASD and best practices for working with this population may contribute to limited resources (Lancaster et al., 2001).

Duggan (2010) surveyed leaders in higher education, and it was reported that disability professionals are understaffed, which makes it difficult to attend to individual difficulties of students with ASD. Most accommodations in higher education are free; however, some colleges and universities are developing programs. These programs can be costly and add thousands of dollars in fees beyond escalating tuition costs (Longtin, 2014). Students are reluctant to disclose to disability offices; although, federal law affords accommodations (Grogan, 2015). These barriers make it challenging to address the needs of students due to the packaging of resources, such as extended time on tests, notetakers, and frequent breaks (Starrett, 2017). These accommodations are identified by disability

professionals and maybe misaligned with the needs of the students, especially ASD students, due to their willingness to explain their necessities for academic success.

“Learning to locate and make use of supportive services is vitally important for a student with disabilities who may struggle in a postsecondary educational setting” (Marshak et al., 2010, p. 152).

Disability professionals are the experts on what services and resources that work to improve persistence in college for ASD students (Forsbach & Rice-Mason, 2001). These are shared goals among most higher education professionals. Due to most goals being shared among disability offices for efficacy and efficiency, organization theory contributes to helping offices achieve their purposes by providing reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities for attainment (McAuley et al., 2007). According to McAuley et al., (2007), “enabling organizations to successfully achieve those goals (efficacy) with as little use of its resources as currently feasible (efficiency)” (p. 13).

People act in unison together to achieve particular, desirable shared ends or “common” organizational goals by conceptualizing, explaining, and ultimately guiding action within different ways (McAuley et al. 2007).

Organization theory allows for explanations between organizations and their environment. For example, disability support offices have a different background than the university. Organizational fluctuations can change the external environment, such as changes in the laws that govern, financial resources, and recommendations for new services for students (Birken et al., 2017). Given the opportunity and resources, disability support offices, and HEDPs may create an organizational culture that benefits students with ASD (Wheatley, 2007). If a culture of collaboration and inclusion exists within a university, then the disability

support office reflects the culture that designed for students with ASD. According to Gersten et al. (1997), the outcomes of research are influenced by the norms and culture of the workplace. The shared meanings and experiences of HEDPs allow for a dialogue of information that would address the experiences of students with ASD in postsecondary education.

Disability theory blends parts of social construction with the medical model (Seibers, 2008). This model allows more flexibility to the identity and not the disabling condition of the students. In addition, this model evaluates students with ASD as a minority identity instead of a form of pity. Students with ASD have more opportunities for success than in the past. They are abled-bodied students with the ability to attend postsecondary education (Van Bergeijk et al., 2008).

The other theory is the organizational implementation theory. This theory is the readiness to change within an organization. Leaders in organizations must be ready to change before decision-making can take place (Weiner, 2009). This study involved leaders, and in order for change to occur, leaders must implement and anticipate the benefits of change before the organization accepts them.

### **Organizational Implementation Theory**

Organizational implementation theory provides explanations between organizations and their environments (Birken et al., 2017). Leaders are the driving forces for change in universities, and disability offices are drivers for decisions (Williams, 2013). Disability service offices are impacted by decision-making processes that may affect student achievement (Brazer et al., 2014). Limitations are set on reasonable accommodations students receive and explain phenomena in the fields of education. According to Yano

(2008), this theory can change determinants that hinder the implementation of services.

Leaders can change the landscape of leadership by creating new guidelines for accommodations and removing the nuances that force students to remain anonymous. The perceptions of disability professionals provided the framework for this study and guided the development of higher education programs for individuals with ASD (Shattuck et al., 2012).

Most organizations are structured on how they want to serve people. According to Schein (2010), the organizational culture drives people, supports the mission, and the way the institution functions. It covers a wide range of beliefs, values, and behaviors that can be implicit or explicit. Schein (2010) discussed artifacts that divide the organization culture, such as at the surface easily seen and beneath the surface, which is conscious strategies, goals, and philosophies. The culture impacts the values and norms of the organization, and it helps to create support. disability support offices are a small part of the external environment of the university. The leaders within these offices play an instrumental role in influencing change.

According to Kotter and Cohen (2012), organizations must buy-in to cause a thinking shift to influence need. Leadership practice centers on outcomes with less regard to the culture. Hearing narratives from others of their everyday experiences may provide tools or opportunities for change. The underpinning of this study is to understand the leadership within disability support offices and their roles within their organization. The transformational worldview provided facilitates an understanding from multiple directors with an emphasis on possible program development for students with ASD building on the leadership within disability office.

Organizational leadership motivates individuals to perform at maximum efficiency and achieve organizational goals (Schein, 2010). HEDPs help to set goals and strategic plans within the organization. Using the leaders within disability support offices allows for knowledge as well as an understanding of what is best for the students and the entire university community. Including other disability services offices links the leaders to their external environments within other universities performing the same tasks. Although rules and regulations govern most decisions within these offices, student-centered accommodation may increase and strengthen students with ASD's success (D'Alessio & Banerjee, 2016).

### **Areas that Affect Postsecondary Experiences**

I framed this study by looking at five areas that affect the postsecondary experiences of students with ASD: practices, barriers, gaps, retention, and support services. Drawing from personal interviews with a diverse group of HEDPs this study (a) amplifies the voices of HEDPS; (b) describes the challenges for students with ASD and the barriers they experience; (c) outlines the academic, social, self-advocacy, communication and leadership gaps; (d) proposes practices for students with autism that can be leveraged to facilitate transitional success from K12 to postsecondary; and (e) discusses current support services as well as retention efforts.

### **Practices**

According to Simpson (2005), there is a need for sufficient practice methods for students with ASD for positive and expected outcomes. It occurs when skilled and knowledgeable professionals use methods that have been objectively verified for efficacy with collaboration from parents and families (Simpson, 2005). In Simpson's (2005) study, he lists scientifically-based practices, promising practices, and limited supporting information

for practice. There are several ways for students to be successful in their underpinnings. VanHees et al. (2014) shared the challenges, benefits, and support needs of students with ASD. VanHees et al. (2014) made six recommendations for support of students in higher education with ASD, including; 1) a personalized approach, 2) a safe and transparent environment with sufficient planning and clear communication, 3) academic accommodations, 4) coaching in education, student life, and daily living, 5) adequate psychosocial support, and 6) leisure activities and a sufficient amount of rest.

### **Barriers**

Grogan (2015) described the barriers students with ASD experience in higher education. These include academic support, transition support, failure of educators to embrace and utilize principles of Universal Design for learning, and social skills support. Additional barriers may exist and warrant further study. VanHees et al. (2014) described the challenges to success including (a) struggling with new situations and unexpected changes (difficulties to oversee a large amount of new information), (b) exhausting but necessary social contacts (striving hard to fit in), (c) processing information and time management (in both fits and starts), (d) doubts about disclosure (a resistance to disclose), and (e) mental health issues (feeling overwhelmed, stressed, anxious, depressed, tired and isolated). These barriers often lead to gaps in services as well.

### **Gaps**

Dingfelder and Mandel (2011) described the deficits in autism interventions that hinder students with ASD. Interventions with students with ASD are “rarely adopted or successfully implemented in public mental health and education systems” (Dingfelder & Mandel, 2011, pp.597-609). According to MacKay (2010), gaps that exist for students with

ASD include: more specialists and staff who are trained in meeting the needs of students with ASD working in postsecondary institutions, active partnerships with parents, adjustments to the learning environment, close monitoring of social-emotional needs particularly during transitions periods, and training for staff at postsecondary institutions in ASD-specific learning strategies and flexibility for support personnel.

### **Retention**

According to Getzel and Thoma (2008), a vital element in the perpetuation of an ASD student in higher education is self-determination. They go on to describe the importance of students working with the office of disability services at the institution so that appropriate accommodations can be made. By failing to self-identify with the institution, the students do not receive proper supports and often struggle or leave the institution. When asked about adequate supports to stay in school, student participants described problem-solving, self-awareness, relationships between students and instructors, and support systems on-campus as being important. Shattuck (2012) discussed statistics on students with ASD completing degrees. Rates of postsecondary participation for youth with ASD are substantially lower, with less than 40% receiving a degree. According to Shattuck et al. (2012):

Only 34.7% of students with ASD attempt college within six years of leaving high school, and 55.1% had held paid employment during the first six years of high school. More than 50% of youth who had left high school in the past two years had no participation in employment or education. Youth with ASD have poor postsecondary employment and education outcomes, especially in the first two years after high school ( Shattuck et al., p.1042).



Students with ASD require more support when transitioning to college to be academically successful.

### **Support Services**

Lindsey Hammond (2014), a graduate student in the office of student life and with a sibling with ASD, wrote about her experiences with (and research on) students with ASD. Hammond advocated for student affairs administrators to examine what is working on campuses, including social programs, housing, and support for independent living and academic supports. Hammond went on to describe a 2-year residential living experience for students with ASD in California at Taft College (2011) called an independent learning program (Hammond, 2014, p.49). Also, Hammond describes Mercyhurst University's Asperger Initiative at Mercyhurst (AIM), which is a collaborative initiative between staff, faculty, and students to support social interactions, executive functioning, and intellectual ability. Finally, Hammond found Landmark College in Vermont, whose website video shares a philosophy of "there is NO one size fits all approach" (Hammond, 2014, p. 50). Landmark College prides itself on "innovative and integrated approaches for students with ASD" (Hammond, 2014, p. 50 ).

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework is an apparatus with multiple contexts and variations. It assists in designing the methodological and philosophical model. It illustrates what is to be found through research inquiry. This study built upon transformative worldview inquiry (Creswell, 2014), disability theory (Barnes, 2003), organizational theory (Simon, 1997), and critical race theory (Connor et al., 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) as the theoretical frameworks for this study. Critical race theory and disability theory from DrisCrit. This

framework helps to expose and dismantle inequities in education by providing patterns of oppression that intersect at the margins of ability (Annamma et al., 2018).

The need for social justice and the pursuit of human rights are the transformative worldviews (Creswell & Clark, 2014). This worldview examines the attitudes and behaviors of leaders. Laws that adhere to equal access to educational services and assurance for individual rights should be observed as fundamental components of social justice (Stephens, 2017; Marshall & Ward, 2004). Various organizations have a different emphasis on actions, rules, and values for marginalized groups that are, at times, overlooked (Stetsenko, 2018). It focuses on inequalities such as race, gender, ethnicity, and disabilities with an action plan politically or socially for change. It utilizes program theory and asks why problems of oppression, domination, and power exists. As such, how does one go about discovering the worldviews of crucial people in an organization? By examining their leadership styles. Key people manifest their worldviews through the way they lead their people. A lack of knowledge and valuation of students with ASD is prevalent within certain school personal (Stephens, 2017).

The laws that govern influence the improvement of educational conditions and academic achievement for students with ASD (Yell et al., 2005). Higher education institutions are responsible for practices and strategies to promote academic success for all students. The increase of students with ASD attending postsecondary institutions has started to push leaders to move towards access and implementation of pedagogical strategies for students. According to Stephens (2017), research findings demonstrated that educators of students with ASD require learning opportunities to educate themselves on the unique traits and strategies available through K-12 school districts and higher education.

The frameworks for this study are disability theory and organizational implementation theory. Disability theory is a social model that was developed by Mike Oliver in 1981 (Oliver, 1986). The model was an aid in understanding the insights of information that may otherwise go undeveloped. This model helps to generate insight into the lives of disabled people for policies and practices that support or sustain an individual with a disability (Oliver, 1990). The social model identifies barriers and exclusions of society that contribute to the disability. The medical model has been used in the past to describe a disabled person whereas the social model is used to remove or reduce the deficits in an attempt to make the person reasonable. The objective of the medical model was to treat the disease or disorder. Neurodiversity origins come from the social model (Graby, 2015). This model considers the disability to be a civil rights issue that campaigns to end the marginalization and oppression of neurodivergent people by shifting attention away from harm and towards the positives on the neurodivergent (Hughes, 2015). According to Armstrong (2010a), neurodiversity started ten years ago among individuals with ASD who wanted to be seen as different and not disabled. It asserts that neurological development is ordinary and should be respected and tolerated as any other human difference (Armstrong, 2012). The nature of this theory is to look at access; although, barrier removal will not eliminate all the problems associated with the impairment (Barnes, 2003). The premise of the theory is that any difficulties and limitations placed on individuals with a disability are assigned by society, which may hinder success. Socially constructed is how Denhart (2008) describes disability theory due to social tolerance. It explains challenges that are experienced by students with disabilities in education (Barnes, 2003). Institutions must understand what is

going on with students, and disability professionals can help students navigate the demand associated with college while embracing accommodations.

According to Denhart (2008), social tolerance creates disability and is demonstrated in disability theory. Disability theory was assumed to be more of a medical issue and changed according to the state of affairs for individuals with a disability. Individuals were now deemed worthy of medical diagnosis, and treatment was viewed as benevolent (Berger, 2013; Williams, 2001). The medical model looks at autism as a disease or disorder that needs to be cured, treated, and prevented, whereas the neurodiversity perspective approaches disability differently by “embracing difference” instead of a deficit (Tomlinson & Newman, 2017). Most individuals with a disability do not experience most of their issues with their bodies; they have more problems with the unwelcome reception from society as well as the physical structures, institutional norms, and social attitudes that may exclude or denigrate them (Goering, 2015). The change from the medical model to the social model reduces the stigma around disability. The social model is a distinction between impairment and disability, promoting tangible environmental and structural changes that can be created to be more inclusive for people faced with obstacles (Goering, 2015).

Neurodiversity brings a new angle on neurological and cognitive issues. The move brings a unique viewpoint to disability theory that emerged as a movement.

Neurodiversity was coined in 1990 by Harvey Blume and Judy Singer. The lens of the argument is that individuals with a disability should be accepted and appreciated.

From a neurodiversity lens, autism is a typical difference that helps to reduce the stigma around disability. According to Tomlinson and Newman (2017), “there is no

normal style of the human brain or human mind, any more than there is one normal race, ethnicity, gender, or culture“ (p. 92).

“Neurodiversity urges us to discuss brain diversity using the same kind of discourse that we employ when we talk about biodiversity and cultural diversity” (Armstrong, 2012, p. 9).

Neurodiversity theory considers the issues that neurodiverse people face, including the lack of toleration from individuals that presume that they are “normal” or “neurotypical” and the positive dimensions of their lives (Armstrong, 2012). Silberman (2016) acknowledged that the best way to understand neurodiversity is to think in terms of human operating systems instead of diagnostic labels, such as ADHD and dyslexia. Helping individuals with autism live healthier, happier, more productive, and more secure lives should be the focus instead of finding a cure to the disability (Silberman, 2016). Society should regard neurodiversity as a valuable part of humanity’s genetic legacy while ameliorating the aspects of autism that can be profoundly disabling without adequate forms of support and accommodations that are more sensory-friendly environments (Silberman, 2016). This model relates to how the HEDPs view ASD and the impacts that affect their transition from K-12 to postsecondary education.

Critical race theory (CRT) is a useful tool to those in the role of directors of disability support services as it presupposes race, and thus, by extension, other identities, as a valid category of analysis as well as acknowledges that systems of oppression magnify how those with marginalized identities experience disenfranchisement. CRT and disability theory’s intersection can be challenging to separate. According to Annamma et al. (2013), combining both approaches to form DisCrit focuses on racism, race, disability, and ableism, which are

theorized interdependently through interactions, procedures, discourses, and institutions of education. It values multidimensional identities and privileges voices of marginalized populations that are not acknowledged within research (Annamma, 2016). DisCrit has several tenets or systems of beliefs, according to Connor et al. (2016). The principles are listed below:

- “Disability discrimination or ableism and racism are mutually dependent and are used to espouse beliefs of normalcy.
- Multidimensional identities are valued and are not seen as singular identifiers.
- DisCrit reaches outside of the cultural norms of Western civilizations by highlighting the social construction of ability and race.
- DisCrit values and makes central the voices of people of color and marginalized populations.
- DisCrit focuses on how race and disability have been used historically and legally to deny citizens their rights.
- DisCrit views Whiteness and ability as forms of property wherein marginalized groups experience gains as a result of interest convergence.
- DisCrit views activism as essential to the framework.” (Connor, Ferri, & Annamma, 2016, p. 148).

These tenets are essential for analysis. Personal judgments and deficit thinking of instructors or teachers influence the referral process for students eligible for special education (Connor, Ferri, and Annamma, 2016). The perceptions of HEDPs influence overrepresentation, whether ethnically, racially, or linguistically.

Specific to institutional cultures, CRT has been proven to be an important analytical tool, offering “critical perspectives on race, and the causes, consequences, and manifestations of race, racism, inequity, and the dynamics of power and privilege in schooling” (Taylor et al., 2009). Thus, as one in the role of a director of disability support services, acknowledging that their responsibility extends beyond merely accommodating a student’s needs, but rather advocating for substantial systemic change is essential as one transition from a leader who facilitates compliance work to one who embraces social justice leadership. Social justice leadership can take on several attributes but is primarily understood to contain a praxis of reflection and action (Black & Murtadha, 2007), wherein the leader both seeks to reflect and understand social justice issues as a lifelong learner who is committed to deep learning and personal reflection as well as action, where the leader is committed to acting on what they have learned to influence systems of change.

### **Summary**

Chapter 2 details an overview of information associated with this study revealing that persons with disabilities may be impacted by limitations imposed by society that were established to remove barriers. Transition and organizational conditions to eternal environments are influenced by leaders as well as the laws that govern students with ASD and their transitional issues from high school to college. Research is lacking regarding disability offices and their impact on students with ASD registered with their offices. A multi-faceted depiction of the literature reviewed, included: problems surrounding the transition to college, academic support needs, and social support challenges. The research discussed in this chapter gives a historical perspective with a discussion of the gaps. The

difference between the laws and structures may exist to marginalize students with autism further.



### **Chapter 3**

#### **Methodology**

This qualitative research is designed to answer the overarching study question and sub-questions to analyze and explore data surrounding the inquiry. The study examined the perceptions of higher education disability professionals' (HEDPs) perceptions of freshmen students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). According to Creswell (2012), the definition of qualitative research is ever-changing from social construction to interpretivism onto a social justice world. The phenomenological method was used to help frame this study while incorporating a constructivist and pragmatic approach through an epistemological role as the researcher. According to Creswell (2010), qualitative research is a holistic approach that includes the discovery of a social phenomenon. Qualitative data involves describing, explaining, and interpreting purposefully collected data (Williams, 2007). The process allows the researcher to evaluate the data for themes that build the inquiry.

Qualitative methods were used to describe life experiences and to give meaning to a systematic, subjective approach (Creswell, 2014). The researcher utilized phenomenology. The foundation of sociology is rooted in phenomenological research, which describes the collective meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). Phenomenology is beneficial for clear understanding or developing practices about the features of a phenomenon and shared experiences. This chapter details the description of the methodology used to investigate the disability professionals' perceptions of transition for students with ASD in higher education. This phenomenological qualitative study examined the experiences of disability professionals working from a pool of 14 public universities within public universities in Michigan. The

objective was to gain an expanded understanding of supports provided to freshmen students with ASD.

According to Creswell and Miller (2000), subjective perceptions of individuals begin with qualitative research, which can be ever-changing and constructed. Taking a holistic and value-laden approach to participant perceptions is critical to the success of qualitative research. Disability professionals' perceptions are noteworthy due to their working relationships with students with ASD and their knowledge of available resources for the academic success of students. Research on college students with disabilities is limited (Altman, 2013). Systematic studies documenting postsecondary colleges supporting students with ASD are lacking (Brown & Coomes, 2015). Although Nind and Wearmouth (2006) found that students with ASD tend to struggle with educational pedagogy and advocacy, no studies have examined perceptions of the disability professionals who serve students with ASD. Through transitional preparedness, disability professionals assist with accommodations, evaluation, documentation, and appropriate services. This key stakeholder group is critical to the conversation about the phenomenon of ASD student success in postsecondary education.

In order to identify factors that impact the transition for students with ASD in postsecondary education, qualitative interviews were utilized. Interviews were chosen to ameliorate an understanding of the participants' perceptions.

“An inquiry process for understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting is a qualitative study” (Creswell, 1994, p. 15).

This study strived to determine the perceptions of HEDPS on the support services, barriers, practices, gaps, and retention within the transition processes experienced by college freshmen with ASD. This chapter will discuss the qualitative design and procedures used in research participant selection, ethics, data collection, management, and analysis.

The first sections of Chapter 3 comprise a depiction of the study design, the participants, and the instrument used to collect data. The last parts of the chapter include information about the data collection and data analysis procedures, followed by ethical considerations. This research will enable college leaders, including faculty, administrators, and student support administrators, to a greater understanding of the unique challenges that students with ASD may encounter when transitioning to postsecondary education institutions.

### **Research Questions**

The study addressed these central and subsidiary research questions:  
What are higher education disability professionals' perceptions of the K-12 to postsecondary transition experiences of students with autism spectrum disorders?

Sub-research questions were as follows:

1. What factors contribute to the retention of first-year college students with ASD?
2. What are the barriers for freshmen students with ASD?
3. What are the gaps in support services for students with ASD transitioning from high school to college?
4. What services and support systems do students with ASD need to help them succeed during their first year in college?

5. What are leading practices for helping ASD students transition into college, so they are more likely to succeed and complete their first year

### **Site Participation**

Fourteen universities were contacted for participation in this study. The HEDPs were committed to inclusion and equal opportunity for all persons with disabilities. Disability Services Offices are on all college and university campuses and assist students with disabilities (Collins & Mowbray, 2005).

“Federal legislation requires most colleges and universities to provide equal access and reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities” (Marshak et al., 2010, p. 151).

Each office assists various numbers of students with ASD requesting reasonable accommodations. These offices ensure access to the university experience, including academic and extracurricular life (Ligon, 2016).

For the purpose of this study, 14 Michigan public universities were utilized for data collection. The universities for this study included: University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, Central Michigan University-Mt. Pleasant, Wayne State University-Detroit, University of Michigan-Flint, University of Michigan-Dearborn, Saginaw State University-Saginaw, Northern Michigan University-Marquette, Michigan State University-East Lansing, Eastern Michigan University-Ypsilanti, Western Michigan University-Kalamazoo, Oakland University-Rochester, Michigan Technological University-Houghton, and Lake Superior State University Sault Ste. Marie. Grand Valley State University was excluded from this study. Table 2 lists the enrollment numbers at each university and ASD enrollment.

**Table 2***2017-18 Self-Reported ASD Population by Public Universities in Michigan*

Institution	Enrollment	Self-Reported ASD
Michigan State University	42,413	70
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor	30,807	20
Grand Valley State University	23,827	77
Wayne State University	19,897	55
Western Michigan University	19,721	79
Central Michigan University	19,694	30
Eastern Michigan University	19,654	N/A
Oakland University	18,955	61
Ferris State University	15,342	45
Saginaw Valley State University	8,362	23
University of Michigan, Dearborn	8,115	45
Michigan Technological University	6,306	1,250
University of Michigan, Flint	5,496	19
Lake Superior State University	2,249	24

*Note.* Grand Valley State University data not included.

### **Phenomenological Approach**

Many qualitative approaches were considered for this study. Creswell (2013) identified five types of qualitative methods, including ethnography, narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, and case study. Although I am in the role of a disability professional, it is the hope of this study to expand beyond the confines of a single institution's approach to servicing students with ASD.

For this study, the phenomenological approach aligns with the relevant questions based on the qualitative approach for collecting and analyzing interviews and survey data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The phenomenological approach studies situations, experiences, or events to help describe an existence that is not fully understood (Creswell et al., 2007). In addition, this approach raises awareness and increases insight into a phenomenon; however,

it does not provide definitive explanations of a situation (Astalin, 2013). According to McCallum (2012), knowledge and truth are embedded in our everyday worlds is the belief of phenomenologists. The thoughts, feelings, and actions of HEDPs are the instruments of interpretation for this process. A phenomenological study explores and describes the phenomenon experienced; in this case, the higher education disability professionals' experiences with freshmen students with ASD transitioning to college. According to Creswell (2013), there are many procedural steps for conducting a phenomenology study. The steps followed for this were discussed by Creswell (2013):

The researcher determines if the research problem is best examined using a phenomenological approach. The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. It would be important to understand these common experiences to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding of the features of the phenomenon. (p. 81)

A researcher may be aware of the phenomenon without understanding it. To understand the impact of a situation and determine the existence, one must be able to describe as well as explain the phenomenon to bring awareness properly.

The narrative approach to qualitative research involves telling a story or sequence of events. The purpose of this study was not to focus on the stories of failure by postsecondary institutions trying to help students with ASD. This study was based on the perceptions of HEDPs and revealed experiences with students with ASD transition to postsecondary education. According to Creswell (2013), the most popular approaches are biographical study, autoethnography, life history, and oral history, which are not used for this inquiry.

The questions for this study were more formal than informal on the topic of students with ASD.

### **Participants**

The development of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 (Public Law 108-446), American with Disabilities Act (ADA) as amended in 2008 (Public Law 110-335), the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Public Law 110-335), and the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008 (Public Law 110-335) have paved the way for students with disabilities to attend college (Stodden & Mruzek, 2010). Students with ASD are attending postsecondary education due to enrollment admission policies to which they intellectually qualify with grade point averages, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and American College Testing (ACT; Palmer, 2006). Students with ASD have numerous opportunities to obtain higher education, although there is limited research on the transition for students with ASD (Hart et al., 2010). Overall, students with ASD have desired outcomes as those without a disability to participate in higher education (Hart et al., 2010).

Disability services offices assist students with ASD with a focus on leadership and expertise in accommodating the individual needs of these students (Ligon, 2016). According to Duggan (2010), disability services personnel assist students with ASD by helping them self-identify and choose appropriate accommodations (Smith, 2007). According to Creswell (2012), including interpretations of events, issues, and problems prioritizes the perspectives of participants in the qualitative method. Investigating the view of disability professionals allows for scholarly inquiry from staff working with ASD students regularly. According to Duggan (2010), disability services personnel assist ASD students by helping them self-identify and providing appropriate accommodations (Smith, 2007). Disability professionals

also help students with social counseling and advising (Barnhill et al., 2014). Using the phenomenological approach to qualitative research allows for the collection of perceptions from disability professionals who are familiar with the phenomenon of students with ASD in higher education (Tarallo, 2012).

### **Participant Demographics**

The average years of experience for the HEDPs is five years or more experience working in a disability office or providing support to students with disabilities. Table 3 is a summary of participant demographics, and Table 4 shows the years of experience.

**Table 3**

#### *Participant Demographics*

Participants	Gender	Ethnicity	%
7	Female	Caucasian	54
1	Male	Caucasian	8
2	Female	African American	15
2	Male	African American	15
1	Female	Hispanic	8

Sixty-two percent of participants have up to 10 years or more experience. Thirty-nine percent of participants have up to five years of experience working with students with disabilities. I conducted each interview with all 13 participants. Table 4 lists the percentages of years of experience for the participants without identifiable information to maintain confidentiality.

This study sought to provide a rich and descriptive voice of higher education disability professionals who shared the phenomenon of accommodating students with ASD for persistence through higher education by identifying their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The data collected for this study included in-depth interviews of 13 higher



education disability professionals in 4-year public universities in Michigan. All the participants had over a year of experience in a disability support services office and over two years working in higher education in some capacity, whether in another administration office or teaching. In disability offices, directors are retiring. The new staff is starting to navigate accommodation needs and assist ASD students.

**Table 4**

*Participants' Years of Service*

Participants	Years of Service	%
5	1 – 5	38.5
5	5 – 10	38.5
1	10 – 20	8
2	20+	15

**Data Collection**

This study examines disability support professionals' perceptions of transitioning to college for students with ASD. Multiple data collection approaches were utilized with the participants to obtain data for this study. This approach ensured authenticity and an opportunity for me to acquire a deeper understanding of the perceptions of students. Data collection began immediately after approval was obtained from the institutional review board (IRB) at Eastern Michigan University, Appendix A shows the approval support from IRB. Emails, calls, or letters were sent to ensure participation.

The phenomenological qualitative research was used for data collection. According to Creswell (2013), interviews are the means of data collection for phenomenological analysis. In a phenomenological design, between 5 to 25 interviews are collected (Creswell, 2013).

For this study, the HEDPs staff from the pool of 14 public universities was sought for participation.

Emails, calls, and letters were initiated to ensure participation from HEDPs. Their anonymous involvement brings information to the advancement of work with students with ASD. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with the participants. Face-to-face interview meetings were held, which allowed the researcher to ask questions that were prepared to garner insight into the experiences of the participants and to enable participants an opportunity to elaborate and clarify a topic or event. The interview process was also in a one-hour virtual environment with an outline (see Appendix B) using Adobe connect with a recording of the sessions. Adobe Connect is an online tool used for webinars and virtual communication. The apparatus includes an option to record the event in video, a chat pod where participants provide additional commentary, and a file pod where participants can upload artifacts or documents to demonstrate, support, or enhance the interview. The virtual recording was used to triangulate data and aided the importance of transcribing within 72 to 96 hours.

The use of Adobe Connect provided multiple data collection points, which were transcribed for analysis. According to Seidman (2013), understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience, interviewing is an interest (Cook, 2009; Seidman, 2013). A researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process through the experiences of those that make-up the organization or carry out the operations within the organization (Seidman, 2013). Disability professionals were interviewed in the fall of 2019. Survey methodology was flexible with options for phone responses with interview questions.

According to Saldana (2011), field notes allow for documentation of social life in action. Being descriptive in the notes provides an account of the experiences and observations of the researcher while participating in the data collection process. The researcher afforded personal reflections, perceptions, and documents for framing of mind. Data collection was confidential throughout the process to protect the identity of all students involved in the study.

The qualitative inquiry utilized to gain narratives of oral history by reflecting on personal guided interpretive frameworks to frame the theoretical lens (Creswell, 2007). To document the accuracy of studies, the researcher employed multiple strategies to validate research and understand factors perceived by disability professionals on resources and support needed to help students with ASD the first year in college. The use of a virtual and recorded environment allowed the researcher to record, transcribe, and maintain field notes for all interviews. This process assisted in the validation, coding, and interpretation of findings. These frameworks are called social science theories, which address social justice issues and bring about change to explain, understand, and predict phenomena. This helps to support the research study while describing why the problem exists. It strengthens the study broadening knowledge being considered (Creswell, 2013).

### **Interviews and Protocol**

I reached out to IRB for ethical approval to perform the study. Once approved, I contacted each university director by phone at the disability service office at the university. I followed up with a formal letter requesting permission for consent through email with the purpose of the study and its anonymity (see Appendix C). I obtained voluntary informed consent from each participant, along with their right and freedom to withdraw from the study

for any reason during the study. After receiving acknowledgment of participation, I scheduled interviews through a Doodle Calendar poll to get the participants' availability. After confirmation of meetings, an email was sent with instructions for signing into Adobe Connect (see Appendix D) with an attachment of the statement of participation (see Appendix E). I contacted each disability services office's professional for approval to participate in the study at each university.

Thirteen interviews were conducted representing 14 institutions, even though one HEDP had a double role, they represented the 14th college. Interviews were conducted using an online format that included either a virtual collaboration space, phone, or email combination. Arrangements were made available to accommodate the technology comfort levels of participants. Both structures provided synchronous voice and sharing of documents. Each participant answered 21 questions with the option to upload artifacts or any pertinent information for the study. All 13 participants had experience or had experienced the phenomenon of students with ASD in a university setting. All participants volunteered to participate in the study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of each participant, consistent with a phenomenological design. The researcher sought to capture the collective voice of the HEDPs. Interviews were the principal means of data collection that identified perceptions. Data were collected through open-ended, semi-structured interviews and analyzed through qualitative analysis. A consent form was signed and received, either electronically or on paper, before the discussions took place.

The goal of this research study was to understand the complexity of each question in the most complete way possible to help the HEDPs express their perspectives. According to Creswell (1998), a series of steps occurs before performing interviews. The steps includes

identifying interviewees based on purposeful sampling procedures, the type of interview, adequate recording procedures, interview protocol with five open-ended questions and space between the question to write responses, place for conducting the interview, obtaining consent, and sticking to the questions during the conversations within a specified time. For this study, interviews were semi-structured sessions with open-ended questions. This process provided in-depth details of disability professionals' perceptions during the meetings, while allowing them to be the expert and to share information comfortably.

The interviews should be respectful and courteous while practical with the most useful information to answer the research questions (Creswell, 1998). Overall, I conducted semi-structured interviews, researcher memos, and existing data (web searches, follow-up phone conversations, and emails).

The participants were recruited by emails from me. By law, all colleges must have an office of disability support for students with a disability. Disability professors were informed on the upcoming email for participation in this study at the monthly Michigan Association on Higher Education and Disability (MI-AHEAD) meeting. During the meeting, the researcher informed potential participants about involvement in future research. Professionals not specialized with the ASD population referred the researcher to another staff meeting. Emails went out the next week with a Doodle Poll calendar to assess the participants' availability. All interviews were scheduled within two weeks. Recordings were made of the meetings then transcribed. Participants were offered a chance to review the transcripts to ensure accuracy, and then I moved on to the data analysis phase.

According to Creswell (2002), the construction of an instrument requires planning, development, evaluation, and validation. This study's tool was reviewed by six HEDPs to

finalize the creation of the 21 interview questions (see Appendix F). Interview questions were each discussed in the literature as detailed later in this section.

To help capture the participant's emotions, setting, and mood, I gathered field notes (Jackson, 1990). According to Suzuki et al. (2007), the African proverb "the pond you fish in determines the fish you can catch" highlights the nature of the data collection process and how we conduct our work for the determination of the outcomes that are produced from the search and collection process. The sources from which we draw and the tools that we employ in data collection determine the data that is generated (Suzuki et al., 2007). Fieldnotes assisted with the collection of data in chapter five and began with a discussion on the main findings from this qualitative study, which are organized around each research question. Recommendations from the study are listed for current and future HEDPs, parents, K-12 professionals, and leadership. Chapter five concludes with a discussion of opportunities for further research.

### **Data Analysis**

Experiences, perceptions, and recordings of stories were employed to analyze the narratives. The similarities and differences in experiences and actions from disability services professionals were identified to interpret data observations from the descriptions. A transcription service was used for member checking. Themes and subthemes data coding was utilized with the language of the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), there are no predetermined categories for data analysis, and this makes it easier to study specific aspects of the data with open coding. Interpretation and impressions of the data collected was shared with the participants due to the collaborative effort of historical research. Building an understanding of the narratives that occur during the

research process for the participants and the researcher helps to identify the themes for coding (Moen, 2006).

For this study, axial coding was used to break down core themes. This methodology uses large sample sizes of 20 to 60, but there are a limited number of HEDPs in Michigan. In phenomenological research, the event, activity, or phenomenon focuses on 5 to 25 interviews to build common themes of participants to validate findings (Crewell, 2013). The more subjective approach to experiences of the individual, such as disability professionals, is more of a phenomenon for this study. It analyzes perceptions experienced by concrete individuals.

Triangulation was included in the combination of interviewing and observations. Four types of methods are purposed with triangulation: multiple sources of data, various sources of data, multiple investigations, or several theories to confirm findings (Denzin, 2017).

According to Creswell (2013), triangulation utilizes different method approaches for discovering data and themes or codes. The researcher cross-checked data with an objective for locating themes between interview transcripts, which were recorded through virtual meetings.

The transformative worldview was utilized for this study. This framework shape approaches to inquiry. The transformative inquiry premise involves practices that result in agenda actions that generate change (Yeo, 2006). The premise of knowledge is not neutral, and those social relationships with society are reflected, and the information gained helps people advance culture (Creswell, 2013). These issues can be entwined with political agendas and politics (Creswell, 2013). The transformative worldview is appropriate here in thinking from a disability lens studying the cultural symbols and stigmas attached to disability identity

and potential positive contributions to society's comprehension and views on disability (Siebers, 2011).

According to Creswell (2013), the disability interpretive lens concentrates on human differences rather than the disability as a defect. This interpretive framework explains the meanings of inclusion in schools and includes administrators, teachers, and parents who have children with disabilities (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Mertens, 2015). By adding the disability support office in the research, the specifics of issues and topics are more precise. The goal is not to further marginalize students with disabilities with respect for the university and students with ASD (Creswell, 2013). Being mindful of assumptions as well as ethical practices with questions that discusses identity, ideology, language, politics, social oppression, and the body is essential. Being conscious of premises as well as ethical practices towards character, thinking, expression, politics, social oppression, and the frame allows more understanding of the population (Siebers, 2011). Throughout this research, the voices of the participants were heard with a schedule for assisting with the change, and mutual communication supports at the colleges participating in the study. The objective is to create a discussion that leads to change, which is the underlying motivation for me (Creswell, 2013). As the researcher, one must be ethically bound to explore and provide an understanding that strengthens a society that values human rights (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002).

The underlying goal for choosing the transformative framework was to help improve academic success for students with ASD and change the experience and social views that surround it. In turn, this study may motivate students with ASD to apply to college confidently and feel they can be successful. Encouraging administration, faculty, and staff to embrace transformative practices was the goal of this project. This may include embracing



flexible teaching pedagogy that meets various learning styles or shifting the paradigm surrounding student supports. This study brought not only an understanding of concerns and challenges that students and universities face in educating students that are different, but it would also allow the researcher to be a voice for students, professors, and disability specialists affected by some of these issues. Personal experiences, practical pedagogical suggestions, and available technology and resources may improve accommodations for students with disabilities that may not modify classroom policies and procedures (Ainscow, 2005).

### **Epistemological Approach to Data Analysis**

According to Creswell (1994), epistemology is the way to which we come to know the information. It is the sincere belief that knowledge claims are justified through observation, testimony, intuition, and other methods. As mentioned by one HEDP, the researcher used authoritative and empirical knowledge to determine the validity and reliability of the information. For example, there is limited research on how to best support students with ASD in academics and social success (White et al., 2017). Students with ASD experience challenges in college. They have difficulties with the way education is provided and the availability of support services. Problems not only exist for the student, but they are also present for college support personnel (Jackson et al., 2018). Non-academic issues seem to be the underlying issues for students with a degree completion rate of 38.8% (Jackson et al., 2018).

I reviewed the beliefs and perceptions of the HEDPs with an understanding of the literature. Students with ASD have cognitive abilities for success in college. They need to disclose their disability, and they should use all supports available (Anderson et al., 2017).

Students have better life outcomes if they complete postsecondary education, and most want to attend college after graduation (Anderson et al., 2017).

### **Population**

The population for this study consisted of disability specialists at a 4-year public university. The disability specialist (DS) worked in a disability office on their campus and had access to students transition from high school. The disability specialists were recruited over the Fall 2019 semester. The information provided by the specialist focused on their perceptions of students who met the disability profile. First-year students with a documented disability of ASD and registered in a disability services office attending college were of interest to this study. Accommodations must have been provided in high school to give a clear comparison of the changes. The HEDPs selected for this study met the following criteria: worked in a disability services office, provided accommodations for students with autism, and worked with first-year students.

Respondents were recruited using four venues: (a) formal letters to directors of college programs particularly from Michigan's public universities, (b) networking with Michigan Association on Higher Education and Disability (MI-AHEAD) professionals who work with students with ASD, and (c) emails and letters to disability support offices across the state.

The study was conducted using disability professionals within Disability Support Offices from a sample of 14 public 4-year public institutions. The skills of disability professionals play a critical role for freshmen students transitioning to college.

### **Trustworthiness**

In an effort to provide valid and reliable findings for this study, a rich thick description of the phenomenon was collected through multiple data sources. Individual interviews with different forms of data collection were used to analyze qualitative strategies to gain trustworthiness. Incorporating more strategies allows for more checks and balances to validate results. According to Creswell (2013), multiple types of validations should be initiated for accuracy. Two or more methods used in a study to corroborate evidence by requiring the use of different techniques, investigators, sources, and theories is triangulation (Creswell, 2013). It is for this reason that participants were asked to share documents, examples, or artifacts that support the conversation surrounding student transitions to postsecondary education. This additional opportunity provided the researcher with an opportunity to verify interview results while locating further evidence to document a code or theme for findings validity (Creswell, 2013).

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are choices made by the researcher. These would include the site selection, which is a pool of 14 public universities in Michigan, and the disability professionals who work there. This study is delimited by the focus on ASD, and the students who were defined as first-year students. The scope of this study consists of public 4-year institutions, and this study did not explore community colleges, private colleges, or other postsecondary options.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are influences that the researcher cannot control (Creswell, 2003). These include shortcomings, conditions, or powers that place restrictions on the methodology and conclusions of the study and cannot be controlled by the researcher. The limitations of this research study include the parameters of the organizations selected for participation. This study is dependent upon the skills and abilities of the HEDPs in identifying the accommodations and aligning the resources to the students in transition. The resources available may vary widely, thus skewing the capacity of disability professionals to assist students with adequate transitional supports and resources. This study was limited by the experience of the disability professional with students with ASD. Universities provide limited accommodations designed for the needs of students (Hillier et al., 2018). Obtaining information from DS professionals facilitates in determining the requirements that are unresolved for students to progress. Weaknesses of this study consist of the evaluation of programs that have helped students transition. There is limited information on necessities for bridging the gaps and reducing barriers. Colleges and universities struggle with accommodations that are reasonable for students (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). There is limited research on how to best support students with ASD academic and social success from the disability professional perspective (White et al., 2017). This small sample size and the individuality of experience and may not be generalized for all colleges and students with ASD. My researcher bias could have an impact on this study due to my experience and title as a disability professional. The researcher is passionate about students with ASD, and the opinions of professionals on the struggles of assisting these students on college campuses. The nature of academic differences among female and male students, as well as the disparity

of advocacy between the two groups, is noticeable. Most HEDPs reported the difference and gaps among female and male students.

### **Accommodation for Bias**

Avoiding bias in qualitative research is essential for qualitative researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Mehra (2002), bias and subjectivity are shared among researchers due to their self-discovery as essential to learning about qualitative research. Some researchers are comfortable with knowledge being constructed to provide for personal and subjective ways to look at research (Mehra, 2002). For this study, the researcher attempted to eliminate the known bias before starting the project. I am the director of a disability resources office at Grand Valley State University and oversee all accommodations with documentation and supervise a staff of seven. As the researcher, some bias may exist due to my role and my participation with students with ASD.

As the director of a disability services office at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) for 10 years, I have also provided accommodations for students with ASD. I have first-hand knowledge of students transitioning to postsecondary education as freshmen. At GVSU, we have a program for students with ASD called Campus Links. This mentor program assists students with the transition as they attend college. Due to the knowledge and role of the researcher at GVSU, this university was not incorporated into this study. A researcher should stay away for problems or traps that can be triggered by the qualitative examiner (Carlson, 2010). GVSU was not included in this study, and the researcher refrained from discussing her role during the interviews. Most of the HEDPs were aware of the researchers' character and responsibilities.

### Summary

For this study, the phenomenological approach aligns with the relevant questions based on the qualitative method for collecting and analyzing interviews and survey data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The phenomenological approach studies situations, experiences, or events to help describe an existence that is not fully understood (Creswell et al., 2007). This approach raises awareness and increases insight into a phenomenon; however, it does not provide definitive explanations of a situation (Astalin, 2013). According to McCallum (2012), knowledge and truth are embedded in our everyday worlds is the belief of phenomenologists. The thoughts, feelings, and actions of HEDPs are the instruments of interpretations for this process. Creswell (2013) states that the phenomenological study explores and describes a phenomenon that is experienced; in this case, the disability professionals' experiences with freshmen students with ASD transitioning to college. Creswell (2013) explained many procedural steps for conducting phenomenology, and the steps followed:

The researcher determines if the research problem is best examined using a phenomenological approach. The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is crucial to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. It would be essential to follow these collective experiences to develop practices or policies or to develop a deeper understanding of the features of the aspect (p. 81).

A researcher may be aware of the phenomenon without understanding it. To understand the impact of a situation and determine the existence, one must be able to describe as well as explain the phenomenon to bring awareness properly.

The overall emphasis of this proposed study is to examine the observations from HEDPs on ASD transition from high school to college. There is a need for research in this area due to discrepancies in accommodations from different colleges (Shogren & Plotner, 2012). Students with ASD are entering college with a goal of graduation with limited research on DS and success rates for students with ASD in higher education. University leaders, as well as faculty, continue to struggle with procedures due to the lack of clarification and training for educating students differently. In this qualitative study, the researcher detailed the research design, participants sampling procedures, data collection methods, and analysis of data.

Data collection for this study was analyzed to determine disability professionals' perceptions of transition to postsecondary education for students with ASD. Twenty-one questions were utilized for each participant with the interviews lasting for 30 to 60 minutes. The disability services offices professionals served as the proxies for this study on behalf of their institutions.

The data from narratives, observation, and interviews were interpreted to identify similarities and differences in experiences and preparedness from different colleges. Conversations were recorded and used in a moderated remote setting in a virtual online environment. Additional artifacts and documents may be collected if shared as supporting evidence by HEDPs. Axial coding was used to develop categories around common themes that validate triangulating data. The importance of data triangulation in qualitative research is for cross-checking data or for following up with interviewees (Marriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Presentation of Findings**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the perceptions of higher education disability professionals (HEDPs), providing accommodations for first-year students with ASD. This study included interviews with HEDPs about their beliefs related to postsecondary education for students with ASD on their campus. Students with ASD face challenges regarding attrition due to their interactions, or lack thereof, in academic and social environments (Schohl et al., 2013). Moreover, this study sought to provide a rich and descriptive voice of HEDPs who shared the phenomenon of first-year students with ASD transitioning to 4-year public universities in Michigan. HEDPs identified their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

In this chapter, the findings from the data collection process are presented. Salient data received from participants was analyzed and organized based on identifiable themes. An introduction of the participants was presented. Pseudonyms were provided as well as non-identifiable demographic information. Core themes were identified when multiple participants described their experiences working with first-year students and their transition into higher education. Passages, direct quotes, and paraphrasing from participants were used to emphasize inclusive practices for students with ASD. The interviews were semi-structured interviews with directors and professional advisors within disability support services. According to Creswell (2013), this method of collecting data offered a look into the participants' expertise, thoughts, and lived experiences on the topic of this study. This chapter introduces the seven high-level themes that surfaced from the interviews and provides answers to the five research questions that guided this study.

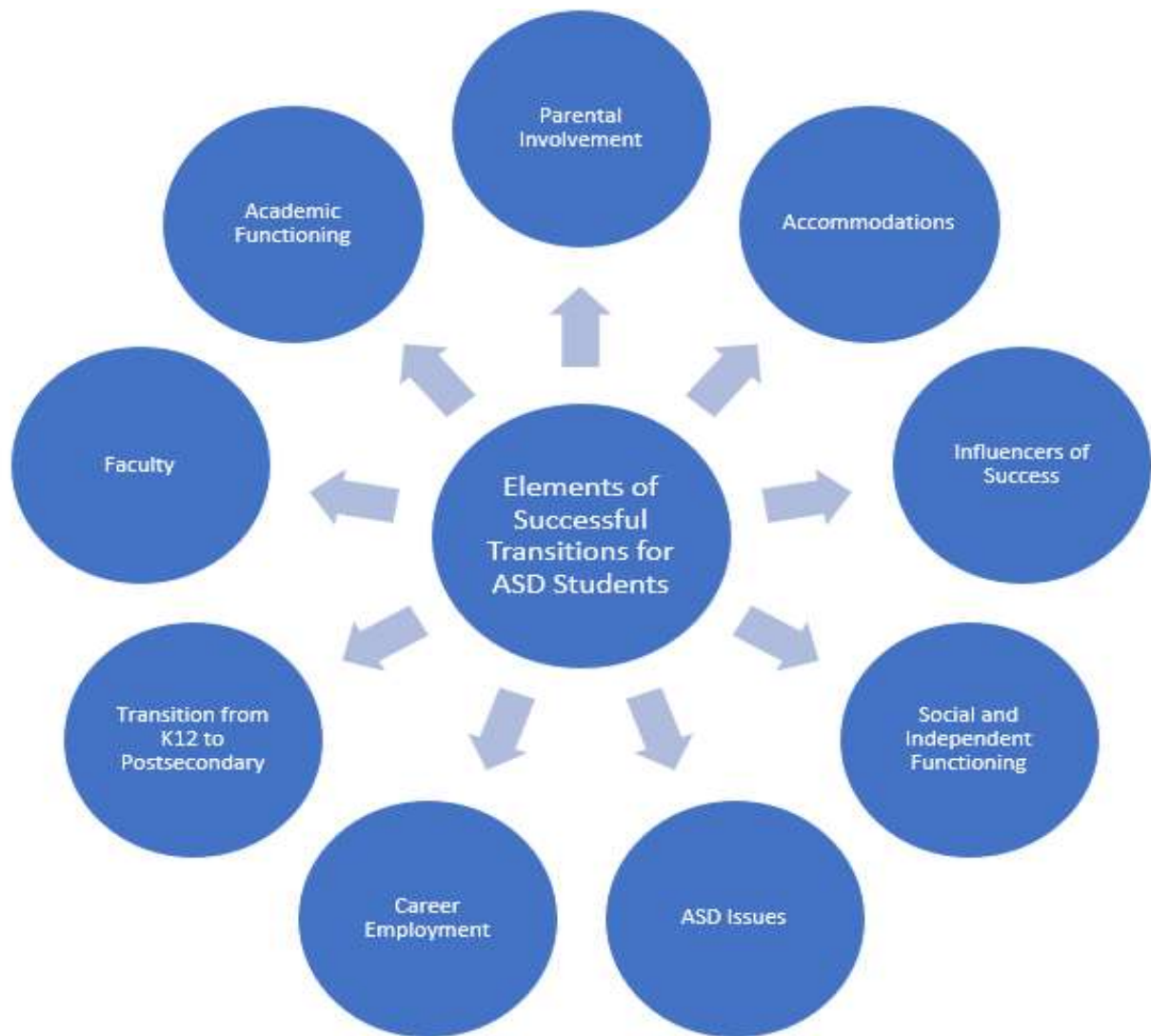


**Research Questions**

1. What factors contribute to the retention of first-year college students with ASD?
2. What are the barriers to freshmen students with ASD?
3. What are the gaps in support services for students with ASD transitioning from high school to college services?
4. What and support systems do students with ASD need to help them succeed during their first year in college?
5. What factors contribute to successful degree completion and attainment by students with ASD?

**Emergent Themes and Connections to Literature**

The high-level themes that contribute to the transition of students with ASD to postsecondary education are illustrated in Figure 3 as yielded from this study. These themes were repeatedly discussed among the participants regarding students with ASD transition from K-12 to postsecondary.

**Figure 3***High-Level Themes of Transition*

In addition, Table 5 gives a brief overview of the themes and elements that I extrapolated from the data. A discussion of the seven themes and supporting data from each participant to substantiate the findings is as followed.

**Table 5**

*Themes and Elements from the Data*

<b>Themes</b>	
<p><b>Parental Involvement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborators, allies, and participatory</li> <li>• Intrusive, overprotective, and barrier parents</li> <li>• Dump truck parents</li> <li>• Training needed</li> <li>• The support system at home and school</li> </ul>	<p><b>Social &amp; Independent Functioning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student life</li> <li>• Isolation and loneliness</li> <li>• Integration into the campus environment</li> <li>• Social Interactions and expressive language</li> <li>• Executive functioning skills</li> </ul>
<p><b>The Transition from K-12 to Postsecondary College</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of student involvement and awareness Preparation, expectations, and compatibility to college</li> <li>• Unreasonable accommodations</li> <li>• Limited collaboration with colleges</li> <li>• Misconceptions of services for students with ASD</li> </ul>	<p><b>Academic Functioning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparedness</li> <li>• Self-care</li> <li>• Problem-solving skills and sensory overload</li> <li>• Neurodiversity-challenges vs. deficits</li> <li>• Communication</li> </ul>
<p><b>Accommodations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start accommodations for college in high school</li> <li>• Self-advocacy and disclosure</li> <li>• Reasonable</li> <li>• Delivered differently with limitations</li> <li>• Student expectations</li> </ul>	<p><b>Career Employment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career Awareness</li> <li>• Exploration</li> <li>• Career Preparation</li> <li>• Internship and skills</li> <li>• Employment search with career services</li> </ul>
<p><b>Influencers of Success</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration between high school and colleges</li> <li>• Awareness of laws</li> <li>• Student responsibility</li> <li>• College compatibility</li> <li>• Structure</li> </ul>	<p><b>Faculty</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Behaviors that are disrupting</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Education</li> </ul>
<p><b>ASD Issues</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor hygiene and nutrition</li> <li>• Sensory overload and time management</li> <li>• Safety protocols and romantic relationships</li> <li>• Emotional adjustment</li> <li>• Prioritizing</li> </ul>	

### **Presentation of Core Themes**

A conceptual framework was used as a roadmap for this study. From the interviews, similar phrases and words used repeatedly amongst participants were deemed salient and have been synthesized into categories according to emerging themes. The responses fell into seven areas that aligned with the research questions for this study:

#### **Theme 1: Parental Involvement**

According to the findings, parent involvement is necessary, although, when a student starts college, FERPA laws are in effect. Parents are no longer actively involved, and limited information is given to parents. In Chapter 2, Hendrickson et al. (2017) noted that in postsecondary transition, parents play a critical role. The family environment impacts developmental trajectories for students across their adolescence through adulthood (Smith & Anderson, 2014). As a bidirectional influence for students, parents tend to be supportive, collaborative, and enact expectations for academics. In Chapter 2, Smith and Anderson (2014) reported that parental involvement in postsecondary education is predictive of students' success. According to one HEDP, "It is tough for parents when their ASD child goes off to college. They are out of the loop of their child's transition and should gradually remove themselves to give the students more responsibility."

Parent involvement in the transition process for students with ASD was discussed as a support service for students transitioning from K-12 to college. Most of the participants mentioned the importance of parents during the first initial meeting with the HEDP at the college of choice. In some cases, parents attempt to keep students in college because they see it as an escape from parental duties. They have taken care of the student with ASD all of their lives. However, moving students away from parental dependent towards independence is

essential for the student to learn life skills. Several interviewees felt that parents need training on accommodations and legal matters, such as mandates.

Parent involvement was found to be a significant factor in the success of students with ASD. Five common indicators were brought up by the participants. A couple of HEDPs reported having a parent that is a collaborator in the learning, an ally, or participatory in the education are indicators of student success. It was noted that parents are the best resource for students transitioning to college. Parents are great collaborators and are useful for the HEDP in helping the ASD student transition to college. In Chapter 2, Eckes and Ochoa (2017) reported that parent involvement in the transition from secondary to postsecondary education is a favorable outcome for students with ASD.

According to HEDPs, students that have ASD that have parents who are intrusive, overprotective, or put up barriers provide a barrier to learning. These parents exhibit behaviors, like checking GPS on phones, logging into the classroom management system, or micro-managing the progress, are great collaborators but create barriers to the success of the students. An HEDP stated:

Parents can be overprotective and intrusive. They want to save students when they have missed an assignment and class attendance. Parents do not foresee the struggles their child may encounter without the family structure and the supports that were provided in K-12.

According to the interviewees, parents tend to be intrusive before admittance of the student with ASD into a university; however, they tend to limit interactions, shelter students from social situations, or micromanage student performance once the student is granted admission. Students do not develop their own life or social skills because the parent shelters

the student. Parents often handle personal hygiene and social situations for their children. However, once the transition to higher education occurs, students with ASD often lack these life skills. HEDPs reported that some students with ASD had presented a lifetime of challenges for parents. Parents see the opportunity for higher education for their students with ASD as an opportunity to escape responsibility. These parents are called “dump truck parents,” thus “dropping a load” off at the institution of higher education, according to HEDPs. The expectation is that the institution will take over the care and success of the student with ASD.

In some cases, parents attempt to keep students with ASD in college because they see it as an escape from parental duties. They have taken care of the student in all of their lives. According to one HEDP,

Parents can either be dump truck parents or participatory in the process. The dump truck parent is the parents that have been an advocate, caregiver, and homework coach. Once their child starts college, they see it as a respite and a break. This is not the case when the student continues to require support that is not available in college. Parents are always a circle of support.

When fostering support for college students with Asperger’s syndrome, parents’ expectations are highly influential (Morrison et al., 2009). This study found that extensive training is needed for parents. According to the HEDPs, the transition from high school to postsecondary involves laws, accommodations, responsibilities, and supports necessary for students at the postsecondary level. For many parents, this is a significant transition. For most, the first year is a significant life change for parents. Parent involvement is necessary for students to transition from K-12 to higher education successfully. Their input and support

help to build the student life skills for navigating challenges of social and academic performance.

## **Theme 2: Transition from K-12 to College**

This theme is the most important, according to HEDPs. The preparation in K12 helps bridge the gaps and difficulties for students transitioning. Development should start in high school, building independence. Students with ASD should be actively aware of their disability during high school, according to HEDPs, because their transition to postsecondary is often fraught with many hurdles. This is due, in part, according to HEDPs, to the student's awareness of their disability during high school. Some students are unaware of their disability and are excluded from the transition planning process. This process should be participant-driven with the user of the accommodation needs that are addressed (White et al., 2016). Parents are generally involved in discussion meetings about students with ASD. Students with ASD tend to have limited input on their disability. The contribution of students with ASD helps to structure accommodations that can be structured for implementation for college-bound students. The transition process starts as early as 14 and no later than 16, which is an annual process. When the student with ASD ages out of the federally mandated IEP. According to one HEDP, the transition should be a process that helps build on strengths that can help establish productive and fulfilling lives for students with ASD. The earlier the intervention for assisting students is essential for preventing a host of adverse outcomes (i.e., skill loss, symptom exacerbation, and poor quality of life; White et al., 2016).

Students with ASD are transitioning to college with excellent academics (Barnhill, 2016). Their barriers exist during high school and the transition planning process due to many factors. HEDPs mentioned that students have not been involved in their diagnosis and

have little knowledge of their disability. Up until the higher education experience, the parent and the school district have been the sole decision-makers. They have created accommodations for the student with ASD. Students are not involved in the process. Even if the student is aware of the diagnosis, most are unaware of the challenges associated with their disability. In some cases, the HEDP describes the sheltering of students about the disability.

Students with ASD flounder with interpersonal skills when transitioning to college. Independence, rigorous classes, and dormitory living are challenges for first-year students in college. Although all students deal with hurdles with the transition, for the student with ASD, it is more traumatic and abrupt, according to a HEDP. Students with ASD contend with communication, social nuances, interpretation, and cues.

HEDPs discussed that students with ASD are not adequately prepared for college and the social skills required for success. The preparation at K-12 with social and self-advocacy and relationship skills are missing. Students who are diagnosed at the K-12 level are not involved in the postsecondary application or selection process. The student also does not have input into the accommodations for academic success, with most decision-making made by Special Education staff or parents.

Students with ASD should be actively aware of their disability during high school, according to HEDPs, because their transition to postsecondary is often fraught with many hurdles. As mentioned by an HEDP,

When students are in K-12, they have accommodations that do not follow them to postsecondary. At the postsecondary level, accommodations are a shift in the paradigm for an ASD student. Students need to be aware of the accommodations that are available to them at



the postsecondary level. This is often a shift in their thinking and leads to distress for students with ASD because the expectations are much more rigorous.

Transition is a critical factor in successful acclimation to postsecondary students (Wasielewski, 2016). Students with ASD experience complex issues with the lack of student involvement and awareness, preparation, expectations, compatibility to college, unreasonable accommodations, limited collaboration with colleges, and misconceptions of services for students with ASD. According to HEDPs, students with ASD want accommodations that are not at the postsecondary level. For example, they would like unlimited time on their tests, make-up exams, and quizzes. I had a student that wanted all his exams broken up with the option to take the rest of their exam the next day.

Accommodations in college are to help prevent discrimination and remove barriers. They are not created to cause an undue burden to the pedagogy of the course. According to HEDPs, there is a disconnect for students who seek postsecondary enrollment. There is often a gap between K-12 graduation and postsecondary enrollment, where students do not know that accommodations have to be requested, and self-disclosure is necessary. K-12 professionals do not reach out to postsecondary to discuss accommodations; there is no relationship to bridge the services. This provides a challenge for students who are left to navigate these services on their own.

According to Hamblet (2017), a successful transition from high school to college is vital for students with ASD. Partners in transition for students with ASD include professionals, families, and students from high school to college. According to Hamblet, (2017), a district-wide plan that ensures no area of skill development required for success in the college environment is overlooked. The process is the best way to help students make a

successful transition to college. In the words of one HEDP, “Accommodations are different in high school and should be incorporated during the senior high school.” According to Oslund (2014), accommodations are critical factors in the successful transitioning of ASD students. This study supports Oslund's findings. In an interview with one HEDP, they stated, “The only involvement with K-12 for assisting with accommodations is when contacted to attend transition night and recommendations for sufficient documentation.” This was also found in the interviews with others in the study. Overwhelmingly, all the participants stated that high schools do not prepare students with ASD for the change in accommodations. They felt that students with ASD are unknowingly discriminated against when they are compared to their neurotypical peers in college.

In Chapter 2, it was stated that K-12 emphasis on access is on educational laws, while in college, it is civil rights laws. According to Hamblet (2017), college disability laws mandate that colleges may not discriminate against students with disabilities and that they provide students equal access to all of their academic offerings (often referred to as “removing barriers”) instead of delivering supportive instruction and ensuring that students are making progress.

Reasonable adjustments are necessary, and the entire campus community should try to understand how to support this population. According to one HEPD,

It is draining for disability offices with limited resources due to the diverse needs of these students. Misconceptions of services for students exist because parents of K-12 students expect the same accommodations he or she had in high school per HEDP. Some of those accommodations can be supported at the postsecondary level, but many of them are not available when they transition to higher education. Examples include reminders

to turn in homework or study for a test. There is a misconception of what accommodations are because students were used to receiving these services at the K-12 level, and this is a shift in their paradigm.

In Chapter 2, Hammond (2014) stated that the goals and vision of students should be individualized. The first year of transition is integral for persistence in college (Goodman & Pascaraella, 2006). According to an HEDP,

Students with ASD experience more considerable difficulties during the transition process than their counterparts. Students with ASD need to develop an understanding of the challenges involved in transferring from high school to college due to the shifts in roles.

The transition from K-12 to postsecondary is hindered by unreasonable accommodations, limited communications, and misconceptions surrounding services at the college level for students with ASD. The subthemes are essential for students with ASD in determining how they might support their success.

### **Theme 3: Accommodations**

Accommodations for students with ASD are generally standard, which is mandated by federal laws, such as time and a half on a test, frequent breaks, note-taker, and assistive technology. Most of the HEDPs expressed concerns that there are not enough individual accommodations in postsecondary education as in high school. HEDPs stated that many students do well with academics; however, they struggle with adjusting to the challenges of college. Dr. Stephen Shore stated, “If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.” Accommodations for students with ASD is not a one size fits all.

Accommodations were found to be a pivotal factor in the successful transition. This study found that it is crucial to start accommodations for college students in high school. One HEDP described the importance of beginning accommodations early in the hopes of teaching students how to navigate these resources. All HEDPs stated that students should start accommodations for college in high school; they must be reasonable, delivered differently with limitations, and created to help students meet their academic expectations.

According to Adreon and Durocher (2007), transitioning to college and the needs of students with disabilities have unique challenges, and numerous studies have reviewed the difficulties. Most of the HEDPs stated that the burden of responsibility falls upon the student to request accommodations. The difference between high school and postsecondary education is the change in the law from K-12 to postsecondary education. In K-12 accommodations are based on an IEP, and once they enter postsecondary education, they must disclose to the campus disability office. According to one HEDP, this process is challenging and significant for students with ASD to understand. Students with ASD have the most unfortunate outcomes, and this may be due to the lack of support at the high school level (Hedges et al., 2014).

HEDPs state that students must be able to self-advocate when they receive accommodations in postsecondary. In K-12, most of the educational community is already knowledgeable about the ASD status of the student. However, at the postsecondary level, students must disclose their disability, or the institution is not made aware of the disability. The HEDPs stressed the importance of students with ASD self-advocating. HEDPs provided insight into the types of accommodations that were being requested, and sometimes requests help to manage behaviors.

HEDPs suggest that accommodations must be reasonable for students with ASD. The integrity of the courses cannot be breached when making accommodations at the postsecondary level. Accommodations must allow students to be on the same level as other students in the classroom or at the institution. One HEDP stated:

Some students tend to pace in the back of the room. Accommodations were allowed for this behavior, which is unreasonable but could lead to discomfort to students or the instructor in the class. It is often a transition for all parties.

An HEDP discussed that when students transition from K-12 to postsecondary, they are eligible for accommodations with a documented disability. Some of the accommodations that are suggested at the K-12 level can be provided at the postsecondary level.

For example, one HEDP described the accommodation for extended time on a test with limited distractions. This accommodation may be provided in K-12 as testing alone without anyone in the room. In college, testing is provided with limited distractions with a proctor per HEDPs.

According to the HEDPs, most accommodations for students with ASD are the same type of accommodations offered for students on-campus. Some schools offer more support beyond the mandated accommodations for students with ASD. Most HEDPs at universities attempt to offer different types of accommodations for students with ASD. The majority of support services are connected to the university as a whole. The supports consist of partnerships with outside agencies such as Michigan Rehabilitation Services, The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS), a curriculum for school-based professionals, social skills training for adolescents with ASD, social skills courses for students with ASD, peer mentoring, and programs tied to their universities that are fee-

based. Resources that are also used that are available to all students transitioning in a university and are free for students include counseling services, freshmen orientations, freshman seminars, housing modifications, and multiple contacts with disability advisors.

From the mouth of an HEDP, students transitioning into college expect that professors are going to give them everything that they ask for concerning accommodations. If the student has not disclosed with the disability office, professors are not obligated to provide any accommodations. If these disclosures are not made, the student is not eligible to receive accommodations. This is often an issue because students are unfamiliar with the process of self-advocacy because they have had parents or K-12 specialized education professionals involved until this point. One HEDP stated that students should be allowed to identify the accommodations that they need in high schools so that they can help students advocate for accommodations. Expectations should be collaborative, according to an HEDP.

#### **Theme 4: Influences of Success**

While all HEDPs concurred that influencers of success are crucial to transition for students with ASD, the participants stated that collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary, awareness of the laws, student responsibility, college compatibility, and structure are fundamental for ASD preparation. HEDP disclosed that transition is not solely based on academics and that preparation for college is based on their contributions. All HEDPs reports that support systems at universities need revamping to meet the various needs of students with ASD. Postsecondary education is different than high school, and students with ASD should be exposed to the college curriculum in high school (Zeedyk et al., 2016).

“Students with autism preparing for a more traditional college environment must be able to demonstrate that they meet the academic requirements to enter a college or

university” (Wehman et al., 2009, p. 193). Time management, studying, decision-making, socializing, independent living tasks, maintaining finances, and meeting other personal needs without assistance (Wehman et al., 2009).

HEDPs discussed that students, as well as parents, may need to be realistic about their child’s abilities, strengths, and deficits. There needs to be an understanding and expectation of understanding the diagnosis, which includes the student. HEDPs explained that student needs to assess if they can complete homework, attend class without prompting, care for their mental health, and control their behaviors. HEDPs report that students may require reiteration that college is different than high school.

K-12 has more unrealistic expectations and challenges than colleges. According to Cheatham et al. (2013), students with ASD face financial problems as well as low educational expectations in their pursuit of postsecondary education. They report to parents and follow special education laws and regulations. According to Duggan (2018), there are different types of students that enter into a university. The four types of students are “achievers,” “proxy,” “forgotten,” and “ready” students with ASD. Duggan (2018) described the achievers as students with ASD that attend college without doing any homework in college with little difficulty with academics. The proxy student has behavioral and intellectual issues that have made it through the high school system with support, such as demanding parents that are pushing their students toward college. The forgotten student is the student with ASD that falls through the cracks of the school system that puts forth effort into their education. They are quiet, rarely express their needs, and do average in school. The last student with ASD, described by Duggan (2018), is the ready student. This student struggles

with time management and organization skills. They are vested in graduating, and college is overwhelming (Duggan, 2018).

The implications as it relates to the research questions that are the barriers for students with ASD. These understandings, beliefs, and perceptions influence success for students with ASD. In Chapter 2, Wolf et al. (2009) stated professionals working with students with ASD do not see themselves as experts and require specialized training to assist this population. Training first starts with understanding autism and the individuals diagnosed with this disorder. In literature, perceptions, beliefs, and understanding are essential for the transition for students with ASD, according to Wehman et al. (2009). The findings support this theme presented from the HEDPs.

### **Theme 5: Personal Issues**

Students with ASD undergo numerous personal issues that influence that transition. Two HEDPs stated that students with ASD deal with various problems. Some of the difficulties are poor hygiene and nutrition, sensory overload, safety protocols, romantic relationships, emotional adjustment, and prioritizing. HEDPs stated that once a student starts college, there are limited support systems in place for students with ASD. Academic support is increasing for students with disabilities, including extra time on exams, note-takers, priority registration, limited distractions, and drop-in advising. Most universities provide limited counseling services, but few counselors know how to work with students with disabilities, according to a couple of HEDPs. Social challenges tend to prevent most students from attending college. One HEDP stated:

Some students are unable to understand social cues. For example, a student with ASD followed another student that he liked around campus. The student did not



understand boundaries and that their actions can be perceived as stalking. The student did not understand their actions and their comfortability of the other student.

Accommodations for social supports are limited, because students in college are impacted by their issues. This is supported by Breakey (2006), who found personal independence assists practical life skills for students with ASD. Students with ASD are often unable to manage daily living skills, and most of their behaviors are not age-appropriate. One HEDP described an example in the following way:

A student at my university did not know that handwashing is necessary to prevent germs. She did not understand that this is inappropriate behavior. Handwashing is taught at an early age, and students were uncomfortable eating with this student. I had to remind this student to wash their hands continuously.

Another HEDP stated that “most students with ASD need to be taught age-appropriate skills. These behaviors are not learned.” Students with ASD have unique skills that help them be successful in college. In Chapter 2 it was noted that the strengths of the students with ASD should be the focus rather than the deficit.

### **Theme 6: Independent and Social Functioning**

The impact of independent and social functioning as it relates to the five research questions is both a behavior, retention, and gap for students with ASD. These behaviors impact students' ability to manage their world, and due to limited resources at the postsecondary level, retention is problematic per an HEDP. Oslund (2014) stated the statistical number of children diagnosed with ASD has grown since 1943 is due to one point on the spectrum. The disability may have always existed and taken on more forms than the one Kanner (1971), and Hans Asperger described in Chapter 2 (Oslund, 2014).

“The message from the research is that disability services and accommodations in and of themselves do not have the power to make or break students’ college experiences”

(Hamlet, 2017, p. 40).

Students do not know how to be successful, seek help, or practice efficient study strategies with poor self-efficacy (Hamlet, 2017; Murray et al., 2014). These findings assist with the subthemes of executive functioning.

Most colleges assume that students are independent and able to maintain their daily life activities (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). HEDPs stated that independent and social functioning is a barrier for most postsecondary professionals. HEPDs stated that life skills should be taught outside of the classroom. Several HEDPs viewed this theme to impact students for persistence, while causing barriers for retention. Universities are limited to providing the necessary support services.

“Because the academic demands at college can be a course of stress, students with disabilities should start practicing essential ‘life skills’ before they leave home, so that the everyday aspects of their independent lives do not add additional stress”

(Hamblet, 2017, p. 87).

Teaching students these skills earlier helps to prepare them for college life demands (Hamblet, 2017). In Chapter 2, personal issues heightened the risk for students with ASD failure during college (Van Hees et al., 2014). Personal matters corroborate this study.

Students with ASD endure difficulties with student life, isolation and loneliness, integration into the campus environment, social interactions, and executive functioning barriers. Students with ASD isolate themselves by choice or are forced to be lonely due to peers in college, mentioned by one HEDP. Students find social interaction to be stressful and

cause anxiety, per a couple of HEDPs. These difficulties can make college life difficult for students with ASD (Wehman et al., 2009). Social networks in college are essential for any student in college, per an HEDP with over five years of experience. Building friendships and communication is an interchangeable process that poses obstacles for students with ASD, according to an HEDP. Students also need to learn to handle conflicts, per an HEDP.

According to Hamblet (2017), families should help students learn to be accountable for their actions and experience consequences. In the words of an HEDP, “students with ASD’s most frequently observed behaviors are nonverbal behaviors such as fidgeting and eye contact, lack of impulse control, and distractibility.” Also, an HEDP reported that “ambiguity is difficult for ASD students to interpret.”

One HEDP stated that they could address independence and social functioning by using concremented language, explicit instructions, and clear or specific directions. According to Freedman (2010), executive functioning skills are deficits that are complicated and affect a student with ASD in multiple areas. Multiple HEDPs stated that students need assistance with understanding the “big picture,” and early preparation is essential for higher levels of development to function in higher education. K-12 can provide ongoing interventions for practical study skills and identification of salient aspects of the material being learned, which includes strategies for taking notes and making note cards (Freedman, 2010).

Students with ASD are intelligent and have interests in science, technology, engineering, math, and computer fields with little or no flexibility (Oslund, 2014). Some students experience trouble with classroom behaviors. AHEDP described a situation:

I had a student that would interrupt the professor whenever they would lecture the class. The student would attempt to train the instructor of the course information, because

they felt that the professors did not know the information. The student continued to repeat this behavior every class period. I did not know how to help the professor in the classroom; however, we had to look at the behaviors as a disruption to the students in the class and forward the student to the Dean of Students Office. I wanted to try to help, but I was unsure of the best accommodations for the student.

Some of the behaviors of students with ASD can be difficult to remedy for some professionals (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Students with ASD exhibit different mannerisms to deal with some of their repetitive and restricted activities, interests, or behaviors.

### **Theme 7: Academic Functioning**

HEDPs discussed faculty awareness, group work, and project difficulties, problem-solving skills and sensory overload, neurodiversity, and motivation for students with ASD. Academic functioning is a critical factor in the successful transition for students with ASD. One HEDP reported that all professionals should speak of the strengths of students instead of ASD as a deficit, dysfunction, or a disease. Working with ASD students in higher education, it is assumed that they are problem students. According to Armstrong (2012b), neurodiversity is an idea that asserts that atypical (neurodivergent) neurological development is an average human difference that is to be recognized and respected as any other human variation, which is the widely disseminated definition on the internet. Neurodiversity removes labeling and removes the negative connotations associated with ASD. It allows for diversity, whereas there are more males than females diagnosed with ASD, and gender are intersectional. According to the HEDPs, there is a limited number of students of color with ASD registered within their offices. Kimberlee Crenshaw (1990) coined intersectionality as a lens where power intersects and interlocks as well as where power collides and originates. It

is the division at the social level with the ability to promote solipsism at the personal level (Crenshaw,1990). In K-12, some students with ASD are separated from the general population due to their disability; this can be embarrassing, and it also forces the student to feel different. In postsecondary education, students with ASD are protected, in terms of confidentiality, from the university. However, students must permit disclosure of their disability due to the invisibility, according to one HEDP. ASD students do not have all behavioral issues, according to HEDPs. They have some positive attributes that help them pick up details that are often missed by others.

The student's perception of their disability influences their first year of postsecondary experience. Students must remember that accommodations are put in place to level out the playing field per one HEDP.

HEDPs discussed faculty and the need for training. Faculty are crucial within the transition process. They can motivate or discourage a student from moving forward. All students do not learn the same, and universal practices are essential for students to be successful, according to HEDPs. Students struggle with open-ended information. Students must self-manage without supervision, and faculty will not be available every day for discussions per HEDPs.

In Chapter 2, Yampolskaya et al. (2004) cited that documentation of specific interventions helps demonstrate the effectiveness of supports offered as a requirement for service providers. HEDPs stated that high schools should start early with assisting with executive functioning skills and that there may be some struggles at the beginning of a transition. The HEDPs must find out what accommodations work to support the student;

preparing for college as early as possible and visiting schools of interest to find the program that offers flexibility and accommodations outside of the mandated suggestions.

Academic functioning relates to one of the five research questions as a barrier and a gap. Students with ASD are not being prepared for the transition, and once they enter higher education academics become the most important. Working on social skills is vital for students transitioning to college. These skills should also be encouraged in high school. Building relationships and having friends is one of the most rewarding, yet challenging, aspects of college life. Helping students understand peers by practicing good relationships with classmates in high school and connecting the students with friends is useful for building social skills.

### **Theme 8: Career Employment**

After graduating from college, students with ASD worry about their next transition (Geller & Greenberg, 2009). Students with ASD may experience problems with adult social roles, although they are capable of employment (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). According to Hendricks (2010) and Shattuck et al. (2012), rates of work for individuals with ASD are lower across students, with 25% to 50% of individuals with ASD participating in employment (Shuttuck et al., 2012). Disappointing employment outcomes exist for students with ASD. According to Henricks (2010), some students with ASD are underemployed if they are gainfully employed, and a vast majority are unemployed. According to HEDPs, students with ASD are not prepared for career awareness. They have no idea what they want to do after college. They are too busy trying to manage the struggles of college and career awareness is an afterthought. Students with ASD should engage in career awareness to be competitive in the workforce.

According to Roberts (2010), based on a person's strengths and interests, career exploration is vital for determining appropriate postsecondary educational placement. Finding the work value of students with ASD can help with career possibilities. Although students are maintaining academics, planning for the next transition in college is crucial for the next phase in life per HEDPs.

According to several HEDPs, students with ASD are open to career exploration, resumes, and interviewing. They are more concerned with disclosing their disability according to an HEDP. They have a lot of ideas but no process of getting there. Career preparation is nonexistent, and students want HEDPs to do all the work with follow-through. Students should start preparing their freshmen year to help build skills. How are these students going to take care of themselves after years in college? Should I be training career preparation in my office? Career services need to provide more opportunities for this neurodiverse group by an HEDP.

In Chapter 2, it was reported that students do not plan for their careers. They have minimal contact with career resources. One HEDP stated:

Students with ASD need internships to help build their skills. It is difficult to find companies to provide accommodations for this population. I have tried to assist; however, I have had students not show up due to anxiety. Most students or their parents contact our office, because they feel we have failed the student. We helped them graduate, and now they have a bachelor's degree in a field they enjoyed without a job. I have students contact me often for assistance.

Several HEDPs discussed issues with careers and the transition after college. Some of them mentioned employment search with career services, and that students want them to do the

work for them. It is difficult to get them to research careers and apply. One HEDP stated:

students pay a lot of money to attend college. It is unfortunate when you hear they are working for a grocery store. I do not know how we are going to fix this problem.

There are going to be more students with ASD working around us. Have you ever watched the ABC series “The Good Doctor”? He is autistic.

In Chapter 2, it was discussed that students with ASD have difficulties with daily living skills.

### **Theme 9: Faculty**

According to Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014), faculty are essential for experiential knowledge of student behavior in academic courses, and they can provide first-hand observations of students engaging in coursework. According to an HEDP,

Faculty are not knowledgeable of working with students with ASD. They struggle with behaviors in the classroom, and they fail students when they have difficulties with communication.

In Chapter 2, Grogan (2015) described the barriers students with ASD experience in higher education. These include academic support, transition support, failure of educators to embrace and utilize principles of Universal Design for Learning, and social skills support. It can be challenging for faculty to understand the difference between accommodations and modifications. Accommodations do not alter the content of assignments, nor do they give students an unfair advantage. Grading and credit are the same as other students and provides equal access and opportunity. Modifications tend to lower expectations or standards in content or performance. It provides meaningful and productive learning experiences based on needs and abilities that are individualized. “Faculty can be the one barrier that can



prevent a student from succeeding academically. They do not understand the challenges that these student experience,” per an HEDP. Students with ASD are literal, rigid, and pedantic thinkers (Draisma & McMahon-Coleman, 2016). Students struggle with time management and study skills, as mentioned by an HEDP.

Faculty need training on universal design teaching practices to help multiple students within their classrooms, stated a HEDP. It is a collaborative effort with reasonable adjustments or accommodations. Gibbons et al. (2015) discussed studies that reported on the non-supportive attitudes of faculty and their lack of awareness and sensitivity by students. It was also reported that students felt a sense of rejection and intimidation from faculty. Due to the non-visibility of disabilities, faculty were skeptical and mistrusting of students with learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and psychiatric disabilities (Gibbons et al., 2015). It was the belief that instructors need more training on working with students with disabilities and that moderate to severe disabilities made class preparation and activities difficult. According to HEDPs, subthemes are the cause of the most significant impact for students with ASD. It was noted repeatedly from the HEDPs that faculty need pieces of training, their expectations of students is discouraging, behaviors are disrupting, and they require more education on working with students in their classes.

### **Summary**

Describing the perceptions from HEDPs on transition for first-year students with ASD from K-12 to college was the purpose of this chapter. Data gathered through interviews revealed the participant's perspective and placed significance on the participant's voice. The themes addressed the questions, which were developed from the related literature, and

framed the investigation. The responses from the participants demonstrated their knowledge and working relationships with this population of students. Thirteen HEDPs were interviewed about their perceptions of support services, barriers, gaps, and retention. After a careful analysis of each case, nine significant themes were identified with elements. These include parental involvement, accommodations, influencers of success, social and independent functioning, ASD issues, career employment, the transition from K-12 to postsecondary, faculty, and academic functioning. The themes are connected to bridging a successful development for students. These elements can not stand alone due to the needs of each process building on students' transitional success and are unable to stand alone. I will suggest recommendations in chapter five.

Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the research. The purpose of this chapter is to synthesize, analyze, and interpret the study's findings based on the research questions that guided the study. A brief overview will outline the course of study, including a discussion of the summary and interpretations of findings, implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The purpose of Chapter 5 is to analyze and interpret the study's findings based on the guiding research questions and themes that emerged. All the participants in this study provided compelling narratives about students with ASD at their universities. They discussed the obstacles, successes, and experiences of students with ASD as they are admitted through their first semester. This study built upon Barnes' (2003) disability theory, Simon's (1997) organizational theory, and Delgado and Stefancic's (2017) critical race theory. Critical race theory and disability studies are intersected in this study, which forms DisCrit (Connor et al., 2016). Many research questions were examined for this study with significant results from several of the inquiries. The final chapter of this study is divided into sections for clarity. The first section of this chapter will provide a brief overview of the research, followed by a concise synopsis of connections to the literature review found in Chapter 2. The interpretation of findings, a summary of results, implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for future research are explained in detail.

### **Research Overview**

The phenomenological study objective was to explore the experiences of HEDPs, who accommodate and support students with ASD at their universities. More specifically, it sought to provide a rich and descriptive voice of HEDPs who share the phenomenon of assisting students with ASD transitioning to higher education in their universities and identify their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The semi-structured interview questions were based on several inquiries related to retention, barriers, support services, practices, and gaps. Documentation on transition was collected from interviews from HEDPs.

Data were transcribed and analyzed to answer the following sub-research questions, which framed the investigation. Sub-research questions are as follows:

1. What factors contribute to the retention of first-year college students with ASD?
2. What are the barriers to freshmen students with ASD?
3. What are the gaps in support services for students with ASD transitioning from high school to college?
4. What services and support systems do students with ASD need to help them succeed during their first year in college?
5. What factors contribute to successful degree completion and attainment by students with ASD?

To determine the perspectives of HEDPs, the semi-structured interviews demonstrated contribution to retention was analyzed. Data revealed that all 13 HEDPs representing 14 institutions, encouraged retention practices for students with ASD. It can be difficult for students with ASD transitioning from K-12 to college without support from their high school setting. Limited assistance from high school can have a massive impact on students transitioning. Some students with ASD in high school plan to continue their education; however, their expectations may not always be realistic (Alverson et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2016). After high school, 57% of individuals with ASD were found to be focused on postsecondary education and 14% on employment, while 29% were found to be “continuously or increasingly disengaged” (Alverson et al., 2019, p. 376; Wei et al., 2015).

HEDPs stated that the first year of college for students with ASD can be unpredictable. Some students survive college demands their first year and move towards graduation, while others withdraw from the university before the end of the first semester.

Support from parents, HEDPs, special education educators, counselors have work to maximize barriers for students' success if they start college. Postsecondary education is overwhelming for students with ASD. An HEDP stated that students are in a "purgatorial zone." Students often struggle, not due to a lack of intellect or aptitude, but due to challenges stemming from leaving familiar surroundings, family, and friends (Alverson et al., 2019; Kidwell 2005). ASD students who have difficulties with communication and social skills, as well as unique needs related to sensory integration and organization, can be debilitating in the purgatorial zone (Alverson et al., 2019; Camerena & Sarigiani, 2009). Autism is the third lowest in college enrollment and graduation out of 11 disability categories (Alverson et al., 2019; Sanford et al., 2011). Students with ASD should be actively involved and aware of their disability to build independence early.

### **Summary Implications and Recommendations**

The findings from this qualitative study provided insight into students with ASD and opportunities to build retention for first-year college students. This study provided a more in-depth understanding of the barriers for K-12 to college. Building learning on the gaps in support services, to learn the services and support systems needed, and to determine the factors that contribute to degree completion and attainment.

#### **Research question 1: What factors contribute to the retention of first-year college students with ASD?**

Some HEDPs reported that they provide accommodations beyond the scope that is typically required under ADA. According to Breakley (2006), additional support is provided differently, with some colleges being better at assisting students. Although the enlightenment of these services continues to be difficult for students to meet, their individual

needs must include finding the best fit or a match between learning requirements and educational provisions. Accommodations may include focus devices, ability to pace in the back of the classroom, course exemptions or substitutions, oral rather than written exams, flexibility in assignment and exam due dates, and the ability to avoid group projects as well as class discussions. The HEDPs also supported some study skills for time management and organization. Most of the universities assist with tutoring for the entire student body, and students with ASD can take advantage of this resource. HEDPs stated that they have to initiate the discussion and help the students register for the accommodation. Most dates and appointments must be given to the students with a reminder on their outlook calendars. All of the HEDPs stated that they meet with ASD students often in advising appointments to provide them with more directions. It was also discussed that disability letters are forwarded to instructors every semester because students with ASD do not readily initiate support needs. Disability diagnosis is disclosed in disability letters with helpful tips for working with this population.

The majority of the HEDPs stated that the most challenging issue for students with disabilities is self-disclosure. Students need to be able to self-advocate in higher education. This is an essential skill for students transitioning to college. Students need to self-disclose their disability. In K-12, special education services are guaranteed by IDEA for all eligible students with a disability. This law no longer applies in higher education; disclosure is necessary to receive accommodations based on ADA. Students are the advocates for their needs in college; whereas in K-12, accommodations are agreed upon by special education professionals, parents, and administrators.

Faculty struggle with instructional practices for students with ASD, according to HEDPs. They expect the HEDP to manage their class and teach them the best strategies. Contacting the Disability Office is a good start; however, what are the faculty doing to improve their knowledge base for incorporating more universal design practices to encourage the strengths of students, per an HEDP? Faculty and HEDPs can collaborate beyond the minimum level. Some HEDPs have no experience teaching in the classroom; while, faculty have little experience with classroom management. It may be a teachable moment to support one another and offer support with alienation. According to Wolf et al. (2009), both parties work well together if they are supported.

**Question 2: What are the barriers for freshmen students with ASD?**

According to Cai and Richdale (2015), students with ASD experience social and communication difficulties that can be interpreted as misunderstandings between students' interpretation of teachers' instructions leading to negative impacts on the student-staff relationships, peer relationships, and student learning outcomes for interpreting others while eliminating stress. Some social difficulties for students with ASD consist of difficulty understanding social cues, points of view of others, and personal space. HEDPs stated that students' challenges with communication consist of facial expressions and eye contact, gestures and body language, and conversations with tones of voice. One HEDP said that these struggles could make retention of students difficult because they are unaware of college expectations and self-advocacy.

HEDPs described executive functioning as a hindrance to organizational skills, routines, and independence. These skills prevent students from being disciplined in their studies. They experience a lack of impulse control and unusual non-verbal behaviors,

according to HEDPs. Students may make weird noises and yell during class time. These functional limitations may contribute to the retention of students in higher education.

Students with ASD have comorbid conditions, which include ADHD, psychiatric, and learning disorders. HEDPs stated that they are treating more than one disorder when working with students with ASD.

**Question 3: What are the gaps in support services for students with ASD transitioning from high school to college?**

Most colleges of HEDPs provide an array of support services for the general student body, from advising to career planning (Anderson & Butt, 2017). According to Bounds (2013), counselors are instrumental in the career development of students. These services do not help students with ASD make friends and socialize, according to HEDPs. These services are not intended for students with disabilities per HEDP. It is difficult to find students with some of the same interests, such as anime. The term “anime” is from Japan, refers to all sorts of animation from around the world, and has become an international phenomenon (Yegulalp, 2018). Anime is perceived to be easy to read emotionally, friendly, and tolerant. According to Yegulalp (2018), it allows for a fun escape from reality and a way to see issues in positive ways. Students with ASD are prone to bullying and stigmatization compared to peers (Gurbuz et al., 2018).

Students with ASD have characteristics of repetitive behaviors and interests. They tend to focus on individual thoughts or ideas. This causes students to struggle to change topics within the classroom. One HEDP stated that students with ASD have focused hobbies and interests. In addition, HEDPs stated that staying focused on class topics is a challenge. Students may have problems with frequent body movements when under stress



that may seem distracting and occur during sensory overload. Students with ASD are sensitive to sensory stimuli, which affects both their academic performance and their motivation to participate in social events (Gurbuz et al., 2018). One HEDP discussed that students experience sensitivities to changes in routines, food, crowds, and noise; therefore, it may cause challenges for engaging in unfamiliar environments.

**Question 4: What services and support systems do students with ASD need to help them succeed during their first year in college?**

The challenges for students with ASD are not academics. HEDPs are aware of helping students overcome academic issues; however, they are unprepared to address non-academic concerns such as life skills, socializing, doing laundry, budgeting, checking, problems with sexuality, and roommates (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). The non-academic issues affect transition for ASD students from K-12 to college. The social demands of college can be challenging for students with ASD. As mentioned by HEDPs, students with ASD struggle with social skills, which can cause extreme mental issues, isolation, and loneliness. Building social skills for students is essential for students with ASD,

“although there is empirical support for the use of social skills groups for young children (Kransy et al., 2003; Paul, 2003), they are not commonly used with the college-aged student on the spectrum” (VanBergeijk et al., 2008, p. 1365).

Students with ASD receive reasonable accommodations that are mandated; however, students require personalized accommodations to succeed at the college level (Zeedyk et al., 2016). Students need to understand their disability, according to HEDPs, and apply to receive accommodations; although, they can register at any time. According to Freedman (2010),

Post-secondary education (PSE) institutions, on the other hand, are not

subject to the education laws and protections afforded to younger students With disabilities by virtue of the Individuals with Disabilities Education and Improvement Act (IDEA 2004) (p. 74)

Students should start educational supports early in high school, including transition planning with IEPs, specifying goals that are necessary supports. Geller and Greenberg (2009), believe that by age fourteen, the planning must begin, and by sixteen, the elements of the plan must be in place for students transitioning to college” (p. 5). From the experience of HEPDs, K-12 does not prepare students with ASD for college adequately. There is little to no collaboration with accommodations between us and K-12, per an HEDP. “I wish we worked more closely to accommodate students with ASD and all disabilities,” stated one HEDP. K-12 professionals can help students understand their accommodations. The accommodations most used by students are extra time on tests, copies of instructors' notes, priority registration, reader-scribe, and audio record of lectures. HEDPs also stated that another issue for students with ASD is housing. Students require a separate room to eliminate distractions and sensory issues. Freedman (2010) suggested accommodations specific to students with ASD, including:

- voice recognition software for dictation of papers,
- advocacy training,
- assistance with organizing class materials,
- fluorescent lighting in dorm room removed,
- more manageable chunks by breaking course loads down,
- social mentoring,
- management of independent living skills,

- counseling and on-campus counseling,
- interventions on classroom behavior and the reduction of inappropriate behavior.

Students with ASD should be connected with different campus support offices across their campuses. HEDPs mentioned that they do not provide career services in their offices; however, other HEDPs offices are including the resource by collaborating with career services. Most HEDPs suggested that they partner with Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) to assist with transitioning. MRS provides vocational rehabilitation programs for participants on careers and a variety of trainings. An HEDP stated that MRS helped one of their students obtain employment in one of the big three automobile companies. MRS services include career and technical education as well as regular one-on-one support with a MRS counselor, per an HEDP. Several HEDPs also mentioned that MRS provides transition services that exist for high school students with disabilities. According to Getzel et al. (2001), students with ASD do not participate in career-related student or professional organizations and are less likely to register with their campus career center than their peers without disabilities.

Students with ASD underutilize experiential learning opportunities such as university co-op programs or internships (Briel & Getzel, 2014; Perner, n.d.; Rumrill et al., 1999; Wolf et al., 2009). Students need to work with career services earlier to learn interview skills, develop a resume, and search for employment. Choosing a major that aligns with strengths is a best practice for students with ASD (Briel & Getzel, 2014; Graetz & Spanpinato, 2008; Grandin & Duffy, 2004; Reiff et al., 1997). It is up to the student to disclose their disability and request accommodations from their employer. Students may want to know about job accommodations before requesting accommodation needs, according to an HEDP.

Students with ASD have many strengths. Attention to detail, technology skills, original and creative thoughts, sharp memory, and consistency strengths are mainly related to academics. To help students understand their strengths and weaknesses, the HEDP gathers information for the development of an accommodation plan and to conduct a resource assessment (Wolf et al., 2009). This plan would also help evaluate the student with ASD's weaknesses for disclosure with disability offices. Giving more information about the needs of the student will assist with accommodation requests if they need to be different from mandated.

**Question 5: What factors contribute to successful degree completion and attainment by students with ASD?**

The demanding psychosocial needs of students with disabilities is thought-provoking for disability offices due to the full range of disabilities supported by traditional accommodations (Ames et al., 2016). Effective among typical and high-risk postsecondary student populations are peer training, support, and mentorship models. According to HEDPs, peer-to-peer programs are useful in assisting with the services offered at the university. All students attend orientation and transition programs before classes. Peer-to-peer programs extend support options for students entering universities. An HEDP stated that due to the unmet needs of students:

We are starting to build a peer-to-peer program in our office. We are hoping that the peers can offer support to improve the non-academic issues, and the advisors will assist with the academic needs in the office.

We do not want to force students to attend class, complete homework, or talk to faculty from the experience of another HEDP.

Limitations with staff make it difficult for HEDPs to meet all the needs of students with ASD. They have had to think of different services or supports within the university to help deal with issues. Some HEDPs stated that most universities need an ASD practitioner within the disability office. Students tend to have difficulties with hygiene and grooming. According to Wolf et al. (2009), additional time on grooming and hygiene should be required.

According to Gobbo and Shumsky (2014), ongoing work in genetics, neuropsychology, public policy, education, and other fields can contribute to closing the gap for students with ASD. There is a complex interplay of individual, institutional, and social factors that need to be addressed for the postsecondary achievement of students with ASD (Gobbo & Shumsky, 2104). Students with ASD have difficulties with their mental health, classroom structures, and assignments, including group work. Most students with ASD experience issues in secondary education with academic content, time management, organization, and study skills; however, when they transition to postsecondary education, these difficulties are exacerbated, according to Pinder-Amaker (2014). Students experience problems with identification of needs, hidden disability, reluctance to disclose, and larger class sizes with limited teacher-student contact (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). According to HEDPs, faculty views of the students are necessary; they work with the students and notice academic failure as well as unique behaviors. According to Anderson (2010), factors that may affect achievement gaps for students from high school include student's family and school-based and socio-cultural characteristics. Although these factors affect American College Testing (ACT) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, these factors can impact students who are transitioning to college. The HEPDs reported that the educational

environment establishes the retention of students and previous learning in high school. It was noted that adequate preparation of personnel and research resulted in producing positive and productive attitude; developing sound educational interventions; keeping abreast of educational service delivery trends; and being aware of social, philosophical, and legal issues when developing inclusion for students with ASD and education of staff.

Self-advocacy is essential for student development (Hadley, 2006). Students must self-advocate in college to get their needs met, including specific accommodations. Due to students being adults, self-advocating is vital for improving relationships and navigation of the campus environment and their lives (Wehmeyer & Sands, 1998). Parents are no longer spearheading accommodations and recommending accommodations on their behalf. High school and parents can start the teaching of these skills to help students ask for help and solve problems. It also allows for full awareness of their disability and the start of building meaningful relationships (Roberts, 2010). These skills help with transitioning into postsecondary as well as securing employment. Knowing how to read social cues with appropriate responses helps students understand the world in which we live.

According to Hilton et al. (2019), better academic outcomes exist when there are positive parent-child relationships. Parents provide numerous supports for students with ASD, from emotional to daily practical skills. Francis et al. (2018) stated that some students with ASD view their parents as their most significant advocates for academic support or physical help. Students with ASD see their parents as their sounding board for plans and provide help deciding options and who to contact for assistance (Francis et al., 2018). HEDPs stated that parents tend to be actively involved in the transition process of their child. They attempt to assist in all areas to help their students adapt to change. However, it is difficult due

to the changes to laws in higher education to protect the confidentiality of the student, according to HEDPs. Parents cannot make their children take advantage of disability offices; however, they are the best collaborator for helping the HEDP assist the student with support. Parents are aware of the assistance of the students and may be unable to articulate their needs, which is a challenge.

A couple of HEDPs felt that parents could also be a barrier for the student or the HEDP professional. HEDPs reported that parents have moved beyond the helicopter parent. Helicopter parents hover over their child and help the child whenever there is a sign of trouble. The new type of parenting style is the “lawnmower” and “bulldozer” parents (Miller & Bromwich 2019; Mullendore & Toney, 2018). The lawnmower parents are parents that intervene early intending to prevent any inconvenience, problem, or discomfort. One HEDP stated:

The parent registered the student for accommodations. The student never came into the office. The parent attended the interactive process with the student. These types of parents do not allow the student to grow and learn on their own. They do not become skilled problem-solvers without the guidance of others.

### **New Findings and Recommendations**

This study suggests training for K-12 and higher education professionals. It was disclosed that professionals are not knowledgeable about accommodations beyond mandates. Students with ASD are forcing HEDPs to create new accommodations to help meet their academic goals. It may be beneficial to provide ASD educational materials through short videos and training handbooks.

Three audiences can benefit from the findings in this study: students, parents, and practitioners in higher education. The following are recommendations for each of these critical stakeholders in the transition process for students with ASD. The information can be used to help students navigate the college environment. Suggestions are discussed to help K12 professionals prepare students for the rigor of college without the intrusiveness of parents. K12 can share some of these recommendations at the start of senior high school with collaboration from both the parents and students.

### **Student Recommendations**

Student advocacy is a critical component of the success of students with ASD at the postsecondary level. Self-reporting is a starting point, and many students with ASD fail to do so. A student with ASD should consider starting the transition process early. They should understand the difference between accommodation versus modification. They are both different and make the work accessible, while one substantially changes the work to fit the student and the other does not alter the work. Students should consider colleges that are close to home that have the right disability support offices, career paths, and interests. ASD students should tour multiple colleges. Students may want to take study skills class and join clubs of interest to help develop social skills. In addition, they may learn independence by doing laundry, cleaning, and managing money. It is excellent for students to start learning all that they can about college life and building on their academics with decision-making. The most vital recommendation for students is to disclose their disability to the Disability Office.

### **Peer-to-Peer Mentoring**

Peer mentoring promotes college students' success. It is a best practice to better support students. Peer mentoring advantages consist of cost, availability of students within



the college environment who love to help, and the sharing of common perspectives between mentees and mentors (Collier, 2017). Support is essential for students with ASD. This type of intervention can help improve the quality and quantity of students with ASD. A peer mentoring program is an integral component for helping students with ASD ease through the transition from high school to college. Most students with ASD have a limited number of friends. Moving towards a social justice lens by providing students with an inclusive education throughout their educational lifespan is ideal for students' success. This type of program would assist with offering an inclusive education for students with autism from K-12 through higher education. These programs also help students access curriculum, educational settings, and the navigation of life skills while promoting independence and socialization. An HEDP stated that this type of program should be an option for all students with disabilities.

### **Higher Educational Disability Awareness Recommendations**

Those in higher education, and in particular HEDPs, need to be proactive in the development of a transition plan for students with ASD. Working through the experiences from K-12 to higher education, there are a variety of barriers that students with ASD encounter. From social interactions to personal hygiene to academic supports, a transition plan is a critical piece. Students with ASD struggle with three significant issues of independence, including daily living skills, and non-academics.

HEDPs work in various aspects within the college. They are advocates for students, as well as faculty and staff, with disabilities across their institutions. HEDPs change the paradigm of higher education as long as they are supported with resources.

Recommendations for this group consist of creating a climate that is supportive and

welcoming, raising awareness and acceptance for those with disabilities, training the campus community to be disability advocates, enhancing programs such as peer-to-peer programs for students with autism, increasing disclosure of students with ASD, and working with faculty on managing these students within the classroom.

I currently assist with a program called Campus Links Red and Blue. This program was created due to the high needs of students with autism at Grand Valley State University. This program includes peer-to-peer mentoring for students daily, and the students attend social training once a week for two hours. Over the years, the program has taken many shapes. HEDPs meet with new students with ASD bi-weekly and upper-class students at least once a month. This allows for the students to be connected with a person when they need assistance. The office also incorporated study skills and time management using the introduction of a calendar and planner. The program has been in existence for eight years.

Campus Links' processes have changed over time. Some relevant recommendations are to make sure that the student is interested in college. Most students are pushed to attend college too early. They may need some time to feel like an adult, and some colleges are not going to build in all the skills necessary to be a productive citizen. HEDPs may need to create a behavioral plan in collaboration with the student. This allows the student to understand what is appropriate and not appropriate in the classroom. This may need to be discussed at the beginning of the semester by encouraging faculty understanding for working with students with autism. They are not knowledgeable about some behaviors that may not be negative. HEDPs can assist housing with accommodations for students with autism. Most students are uncomfortable living with more than one student. This will prevent movement later in the semester. HEDPs can provide motivation for parents to have a support system for

the students that are close to the college. Students get lonely and need someone that they are familiar with to help deal with some of the mental health difficulties. HEDPs can build a relationship with parents; in the event, you need their suggestions or advice. They have worked longer with the students, and they can provide appropriate remedies. I would also suggest a mental health professional that can work with ASD students. Most students with ASD deal with some mental disability. It is also essential to know your students with ASD and the pronouns they prefer to use. Some ASD students do not leave college the way that they came to college. They find their identity, and college helps with the transition of knowing oneself.

### **Transition to K-12 and Postsecondary**

All the participants in this study reported little to no interactions with K-12 professionals. It was stated that they mostly review the documentation and decipher through the accommodations from K-12 to accommodate students in postsecondary education, per an HEDP. A bridge or pathway to college programs for students with disabilities would be helpful. One HEDP mentioned that colleges might not want to put in the investment. “No college campus wants a large number of students with disabilities; however, students with mental health are surpassing all the students registered within our office,” according to a participant. An informal inventory for K-12 is located in Appendix G.

Services available to students with ASD attending postsecondary institutions are the same services for the student body, according to HEDPs. The services are academic services, mental health, and social activities such as clubs. It was stated that students with ASD need more opportunities to be taught life skills. According to VanBergeijk et al. (2008), students with ASD need more explicit teaching with role plays for social skill development to help

improve difficulties with generalizing behaviors across settings. New accommodations will need to be created to help assist students in the classroom. Accommodations added by an HEDP help curve some of the conducts that exist from the student. I attempted to disclose as much as possible to assist the student, not the disability, in improving academic success.

Most academic programs for ASD students in college are helpful; however, the non-academic needs are not being addressed. Most HEDPs stated that the accommodations do not address the deficits that ASD students face. Students with ASD struggle with social interactions, executive functioning, and working memory. Most disability offices, faculty, and the campus know how to accommodate students with ASD's most significant challenges. Students do not disclose their disabilities without documentation from disability offices, and the avoidance of some essential class requirements is difficult, such as group projects in lab courses.

An HEDP stated that it is difficult for one office to help build life skills for students with ASD. This should be a collaborative effort for the entire campus. The campus environment needs to include more one-on-one support and counseling centers, as well as utilizing advising centers to provide the resource. It may be a great idea to have more partnerships with Disability and Counseling offices. They are providing counseling services in Disability Offices with an employee that knows about the population and support the HEDPs within their jobs, according to HEDPs.

### **Parent Recommendations for K-12**

As students with ASD leave the K-12 environment and move on to the postsecondary level, the parents lose access to progress monitoring as well as academic and social updates. These critical elements of communication, the IEP, and the accommodations outlined in the

K-12 special education system are not replicated at the postsecondary level for parents. It is for this reason that parental involvement in transition from K-12 to postsecondary is a critical component to success.

There are several resources and approaches needed to assist parents with their students in K-12 for a successful transition. Unfortunately, there is still a vast need for educators and other support staff to increase their understanding of autism as it relates to current research, assistive technology, behavioral approaches, case management, parental engagement, disclosure, and 504 plan/IEP development (Humphrey, & Lewis, 2008).

Most parents are advocates for their children in K-12. Once the child moves to college, these skills have formed, and it is critical to help parents understand the challenges of their child (Eccles, & Harold, 1996).

Given the current statistics and projections (both nationally and globally), there is a need for educators to increase awareness, knowledge, and understanding of ASD. Because of the lack of expertise within educational systems, parents are forced to become the source of training teachers, the particular special education resource person, and school administrators. As such, it places an additional burden on the parent to provide free training and spend a significant amount of time researching the various conditions specific to their child's autism. This builds even more challenges and biases faced by families that have lower educational attainment, income, and networks to even know how to interact and direct educators. Low socioeconomic families rely heavily on educators to provide information.

There are many new assistive technologies and apps available that can help autistic students manage their unique characteristics. However, there are no classes or resources provided by schools to teach students, or their parents, about new assistive technologies and

apps. As it stands today, parents will have to conduct their reviews and gather recommendations to see if a particular app or assistive technology may be a viable solution to address a specific need.

There appears to be a lot of research available regarding young children with autism and less on transition issues and challenges that ASD students encounter.

“According to the US Department of Education, there are 6,608,446 youths in special education, with 10% between 14 and 21 years of age” (Schall et al., 2012, 193). “The examinations consisted of autism treatment surveys: services received by children with autism spectrum disorders in public school classrooms” (Hess et al., 2008), and “A Case Study on Autism: School Accommodations and Inclusive Settings” (Coffey & Obringer, 2004). According to Iovannone et al. (2003), focusing on autism and other developmental disabilities builds effective educational practices for students with autism spectrum disorders. However, there is not enough research on older teens transitioning from elementary school. As such, parents need a resource that can do a better job of informing ASD changes over time due to developmental differences that occur in growing children and students. This issue is compounded by gender, race, ethnicity, and various intersections. It is common knowledge that in the U.S., the American population will soon transition from mostly white to a majority reflecting people of color.

More racially and culturally competent autism HEDPs are needed. The assumption that high school will remain the same is dangerous and prevailing (Duggan, 2018). ASD occurs as often in African Americans as Caucasian children, and there is a delay in diagnosis and treatment due to parents' belief that the only problem is being able to control the behavior (Burkett et al., 2015). Most Black mothers hide from the diagnoses and do not want

to believe that their child has autism (Burkett et al, 2015). According to Dr. Sabrina Robins (2020), a parent advocate, there is a high level of mystery and a false sense of comfort when relying on schools. Specific professionals in K-12 and HEDPs need to have a working knowledge of African American families, family structures, and understanding of the African American educational experience in the U.S. Having this knowledge for professionals in both K12 and postsecondary helps with being culturally appropriate for the process of IEP and 504 planning. Case management for students with autism is fragmented and does not allow enough direct interaction between the mental health professionals (e.g., therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists) and schools. The divide between schools and mental health professionals from the parents' perspective is artificial, and they are dealing with the same student. According to Prince-Hughes (2002),

“It is only recently that Autism Spectrum Disorders have begun to be more widely known not only to autistic people themselves and the professional community that diagnoses and treats these problems, but also to people who provide services to the disabled, such as the counselors, advisors, professors, administration, and disabled student services workers in the university”. ( p. XXIII)

Having input from the mental health professionals is particularly important because of the lack of training and knowledge about the complexities of ASD that impact learning and executive function and may impede the learning process (Macklem, 2010). The best and most innovative solutions and ideas often do not come from schools. Instead, either the parents or mental health therapists bring forth the ideas.

Although schools purport to desire to have parent engagement, this is not necessarily the case. Parents discern that schools want to define parental involvement that does not

necessarily reflect an equal partnership (Driessen et al., 2005). There is crucial information that parents require knowledge concerning what is going in the classroom. Parents need to see graded worksheets and assignments. In high school, in particular, it is difficult to get those crucial pieces of paper. Parents are often directed to the online grading system in K-12. Parents feel that teachers do not fully understand the type of information needed, such as how group projects are assigned, and what are the interactions between the child with autism and others (Karst, & Van Hecke, 2012). Parents want to know their child's day is organized, such as lunch periods. Is the teacher aware of the accommodations in the IEP/504 plan? Some school professionals get defensive or feel threatened when a parent is overly involved (Todd & Higgins, 1998). This casts parents in a negative light with the educational system, and we are merely trying to support their efforts.

Proper communication and management of the IEP and 504 Plan are essential. More training is needed for parents to understand the IEP/504 Plan process in relatable language and not in the educational vernacular that is couched in the legalese of state standards. Parents feel powerless in partnership with schools (Todd & Higgins, 1998). A parent advocate should be a necessary resource that is incorporated in the plan development process to serve as a translator (Trainor, 2010). The first plan is typically the most comprehensive, but parents (if they are lucky) find out that very few of the teachers are knowledgeable of the transition plans. Even worse, parents are not notified if the service or referred service provider did not provide the speech or occupational therapy services that are listed in the IEP/Building Plan (Salembier, & Furney, 1997). So, it is a fight to get an ASD IEP, and it is exhausting trying to manage the plan once it has been put in place.



The primary disconnect between the schools and the parents falls on the parent. Parents do not understand their role or responsibility in obtaining school services (Ankeny, Wilkins, & Spain, 2009). Parents either do not fully understand their rights, or they do not know how to exercise their rights without feeling like it will negatively impact their child (Finders & Lewis, 1994). There is a high level of mystery and a false sense of comfort when relying on schools. According to Banach et al (2010), parents have to seek out of school support to learn the necessary information that is needed to support the student with ASD.

**What accommodations are needed?** There is not a single list of accommodations for students with ASD because each case is unique. However, some core accommodations should be readily and consistently available, including:

- Arrange social skills courses that cover in-the-classroom, groups, lunch, and out-of-school situations.
- Provide training on how to advocate for yourself and how to ask for what you need to be successful?
- Make study and organization skills apart of the DS Office. This person should meet with all ASD students at the beginning of the semester to help them get acclimated early.
- Make the implicit and hidden school rules explicit during the beginning of the semester. Offer training for students with ASD on resources, especially Title IX and Code of Conduct. Try to include the parents in the event issues that occur during the semester.
- Make it mandatory to provide a rubric for all grades by using programs such as blackboard.

- Obtain notes from students and work with a learning specialist to help organize the information.
- Provide in-classroom monitoring or check-ins with HEDPs, including reminders of deadlines and negotiation of deadlines for assignment submissions.
- Build in a monthly review of the classroom needs to make sure the memo does not require updates, and the instructor is not having any difficulties.
- Follow up by email to investigate if the student understands the material. The student may not give you enough feedback during verbal communication.
- Allow the flexibility to modify the homework or project to accommodate special interests. Students with ASD tend to fall behind in their classes. Suggest tutoring services on campus or a peer to help the student stay productive.
- Train students on assistive-technology.
- Meet with students with ASD weekly counseling accommodations with a trained ASD counselor. Students have comorbid disabilities, and psychological support is critical for managing behaviors.

Parents need more support in helping to manage homework in K-12. According to Dr. Robins, parents in K-12 struggle with organizing the homework, and teaching the material due to lateral thinking. Homework is all-consuming because parents are only able to get one subject completed or somewhat partially completed per night. According to Mount and Dillon (2014), homework for ASD students, as noted by parents, is difficult due to coping strategies. As a result, parents always have mounds of late or missing assignments (Korzekwa, 2011). It is not that the student is lazy, but there is not an understanding that ASD students have to process each thought manually.

Parents need more support on how to transition from K-12 to college or vocational training (Gill, 2007). This is a whole new world, and the support systems disappear. Moreover, because the student is an adult, the parent cannot be part of the official process. Students with ASD still need personal guidance, support, and direction for life skills along with academic skills. A specific orientation should be provided for parents of students with ASD.

### **Parental Involvement**

Students with ASD tend to take a little longer to graduate. With students that tend to graduate from school, the parent was heavily involved in the daily routines, per an HEDP. Another HEDP stated that parents should try to be close to their child's school for support. Some parents are the "dump truck parents," they drop the student with ASD off and expect the school to accommodate all struggles. Parents need to evaluate what school is going to be the best fit and the collaboration opportunities for building relationships with the disability office, per an HEDP. The participants all concluded that connections are meaningful; however, parents should not be the doer of those relationships. Faculty are not going to have a conversation with you about their students. Parents' involvement should be incorporated to move the student to the next level of adulthood per HEDPs. According to Reynolds (2010), parents' involvement and engagement practices have been associated with school success. Parents need to develop a transition plan early. They need to find the right college for their child that is going to provide a positive climate. Although these suggestions are helpful, some marginalized parents may need to be empowered to advocate for their child's educational resources. Some schools may represent a top-down projection of standards and values while supporting conformity rather than promoting access to resources

for parents. According to Auerbach (2007), legacies of racism, deficit thinking, and mutual distrust have separated parents of color and schools due to cultural divides that are often separated by cultural gaps. The model of deficit thinking was formulated from imputation, not documentation, known as pseudoscience, which is the process of blaming the victim (Valencia, 1997). Some families may not want to acknowledge or burden their child with more barriers. Deficit thinking manifests in immoral behaviors, language, lack of motivation to learn, and other equity traps that are used to describe deficit perspectives, which are an endogenous theory that posits that students who fail in school do so due to their internal deficits or deficiencies (Valencia, 1997). Categories such as learning disability, intellectual disability (formerly called mental retardation), and emotional disturbance are a part of a disproportionate number, which may include non-dominant racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). Parents of color with high educational aspirations for their children may need to take deliberate steps to ensure access and counter the tendencies of schools to reproduce inequality in K12 underachievement and underrepresentation in 4-year colleges (Auerbach, 2007). They should investigate the support services and build self-advocacy. Students will need to disclose their disability and talk to their professors. Parents should look for colleges that have career consultants that can help their child find a job after graduation. Nobody wants a degree without employment. High school should be used as training for students transitioning to college. These suggestions will help with retention and promote independence. Duggan (2018) created a list of information that students should bring to college and what parents need to know. Students should understand their diagnosis, have the ability to self-advocate and succeed in education classes that are homework or exam based, have some outside work experience, form a desire to

attend college (important), develop an ability to manage time to complete homework independently with limited involvement of parents for self-directed homework, and have the ability to monitor as well as control the degree of technology usage as well as gaming. Parents need to understand and evaluate their expectations of their student's abilities, strengths, and deficits realistically, and the openness to be involved in their child's education (with limits; Duggan, 2018). It is also essential for parents to ask questions to the university about how many students with ASD have graduated, employed, and received internships (Duggan, 2018). This list is a start for both parents and students transitioning to college. If some of these questions are not answered, you may want to look at other colleges. Students with ASD need to be able to function in society as adults.

In the appendices, there are three tools. (a) Appendix G is a transition planning tool for students with autism transitioning to college, (b) Appendix H is a transition tool for students with autism transitioning to college, (c) Appendix I is an ASD parent preparation tool, (d) Appendix J is a formal inventory of skills for students with ASD for determining college readiness. These tools were created to increase awareness of students with ASD transitioning to college.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The current research study provided a path for new educational research. An exploration of HEDPs' perceptions of transitional practices for students with ASD was investigated. The study findings indicated multiple opportunities for other possible research studies involving transition and accommodations for students with disabilities. Although the study provided valuable information from HEDPs, who work with students with disabilities and self-disclose to their offices, added research is needed since the number of students with

ASD attending colleges across the country is increasing. Due to laws that are created to reduce discrimination for students with ASD, K-12, and colleges are attempting to remove barriers to assist this population with supports. From this study, I found a slight difference in the perceptions and accommodation practices of HEDPs.

The pursuit of postsecondary education for students with ASD is increasing. Supports that meet the unique needs of this population are incumbent upon K12 and colleges to work collaboratively to identify and provide appropriate supports. Findings from this study suggest that traditional services at the K12 and university level may not be sufficient to meet the needs of students with ASD. More individualized supports may need to be extended beyond the reasonable accommodations typically recommended. Goals within transition plans and pieces of training for K12 leaders are essential to help support and accommodate students with interest in attending a university. K12 leaders would need to be aware of the necessity of adequate supports for assisting students to transition. Students will need to disclose their disability upon admittance, and K12 leaders can help process this support through exit IEP meetings with permission from the student and parent to coordinate the next steps for the student. Another finding was that most colleges do not have a person on campus that specializes in ASD counseling. This is an issue due to the inimitable needs of students with ASD. Students have comorbid disorders, which may include mental health and behavioral problems. These challenges may cause further barriers for students for college achievement. Another finding is that faculty exhibit deficit thinking when assisting this population. They have limited knowledge of classroom management and behavioral classroom intervention. Faculty may need to be notified early on sporadic behaviors that cause disruptions to the classroom environment. Students should also meet with an HEDP

regularly to help with time management, daily living, and study skills. A good practice is to start at the beginning of the year with a planner. Leaders within K12 and higher education a disability liaison that helps to assist students with their transition. This liaison would only work with students with disabilities and colleges to coordinate accommodations and stay knowledgeable on the connections for students as well as parents.

In conclusion, where are the students of color with ASD? Are these students afforded the same opportunities as all students? Why are they not disclosing? This study found that very few students of color are registered in disability offices. Are students finding that community colleges are an easier choice to help with development? Another discovery was that students that graduate from a 4-year university are not employed in positions within their major. Some students continue to search for employment. It is critical for students that attend college to be gainfully employed. There needs to be more research on students with autism finding employment in their field. College is not cheap and continues to increase in cost, students with autism are met with more challenges, and the job obtainability is short without communication skills.

Future research should examine the transition from K-12 to postsecondary from the perspectives of K-12 teachers, leaders, and special education teams. This would provide an opportunity to know what are the K-12 professionals are doing to help these student meet their next goal. Are K-12 knowledgeable on the laws, and are they providing resources to help ASD students be successful in higher education? It is unfair that HEDPs must attempt to build skills in college. Autism challenges HEDPs to examine stigmas that impact any structures within institutions that prevent disclosure of a disability to disability support offices.

Further research should also investigate the perspectives from community colleges on the transition of students from K-12. Most community colleges provide some expanded support due to their connections to the K-12 system. Understanding the views of the parents of K-12 students supports with ASD by encouraging independence while investigating critical factors that predict successful outcomes. Looking at ASD student gender differences and their degree of self-advocacy and accommodations should be examined. It was reported that most ASD students do not leave college with the gender assignment that they arrived at college, according to a couple of HEDPs. Students with Autism and gender dysphoria are growing among the trans population (Lehmann & Leavey, 2017). Students with autism may fluctuate over their lifetime due to sexual orientation and gender identity ( Bao & Swaab, 2011). Also, researchers can conduct a case study to track students' experiences from high school to college to understand the barriers and challenges in the 12th grade. Finally, a study exploring the professional development of HEDP staff and high school staff on transition for students with ASD, especially looking at marginalized populations. Are students disclosing their disabilities and being prepared to attend college with autism? More research should focus on private schools as well, to determine if they are only following the mandated accommodations or are providing extra assistance.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions of higher education disability professionals who provide accommodations and support to students within higher education. It sought to render a narrative and rich voice for describing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in relationship to the phenomenon of students with ASD



attending college. To facilitate positive outcomes for students with ASD, researchers must continue to examine the educational trends of the population for persistence and retention.

The findings from this dissertation provided multiple areas of practical application for HEDPs, parents, students, and leaders. Data collected from this dissertation can be used to further the dialogue between secondary and postsecondary institutions to advocate for students with ASD and remove the gaps within educational entities. From a professional and organizational standpoint, there needs to be clearly defined standards for students with ASD with transition reports shared. These reports need revisions to display more information to help the student access higher education from secondary education. Both organizations must work collaboratively, in addition to participation in K-12 transition fairs for educating students and families. There needs to be shared learning to help students be successful in college by closing the divide gaps. Attached to this document are tools from Appendix G through J I to help parents, K12, students, and leaders to help bring awareness to the transitional differences. These tools will impact the transition for students with ASD and increase preparation for college.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A  
IRB Approval Letter

## Appendix A

## IRB Approval Letter

Date: 3-3-2020

IRB #: UHSRC-FY19-20-7

Title: Disability Professionals Perceptions of Transition Processes of College Freshmen with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Creation Date: 7-17-2019

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Shontaye Witcher

Review Board: University Human Subjects Review Committee

Sponsor:

## Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Limited	Decision	<b>Exempt - Limited IRB</b>
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## Key Study Contacts

Member	Rema Reynolds	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	rreyno15@emich.edu
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Member	Shontaye Witcher	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	switche1@emich.edu
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Member	Shontaye Witcher	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	switche1@emich.edu
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Appendix B  
Informed Consent Form

## Appendix B

## Informed Consent Form

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**RESEARCH @ EMU**

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**Informed Consent Form**

The person in charge of this study is Shontaye Witcher. Shontaye is a student at Eastern Michigan University. Her faculty advisor is Dr. Rema Reynolds. Throughout this form, this person will be referred to as the “investigator.”

**Project Title:** Disability Professionals Perceptions of Transition Processes of College Freshmen with Autism Spectrum Disorder

**Principal Investigator:** Shontaye Witcher, Doctoral Student

**Faculty Advisor/Chair:** Dr. Rema Reynolds, Department of Leadership & Counseling

**Invitation to participate in research**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must identify as a leader within a Disability Office with a four-year university. Participation in research is voluntary. Please ask any questions you have about participation in this study

**Important information about this study**

- The purpose of the study is to examine the perceptions of the director’s experience on students with Autism Spectrum Disorder Transition.
- Participation in this study involves a 45-60-minute virtual individual interview meeting on Adobe Connect with the investigator.
- The meeting will be audio and video recorded.
- Within the virtual connection, a chat feature will be utilized. You will have an opportunity to provide additional commentary, feedback, or questions.
- Within the virtual connection, a file pod will be available where participants can upload sample documents (life policy or procedures or support or accommodation) – nothing will be student identifiable.
- Risks of this study include a potential loss of confidentiality.

**What is this study about?**

The purpose of the study is to learn more about how students with ASD transition and adapt to their first year of postsecondary institutions as freshmen students.

**What will happen if I participate in this study?**

Participation in this study involves

- Completing a series of questions. It should not take longer than 60 minutes to complete the interview questions. The interview questions ask about your program at your school, and the accommodations offered.

- Audio and video recording for this study using the Adobe Connect (virtual) format. If you are audio and video recording, it will be possible to identify you through your voice and if you activate the video record feature available through Adobe Connect. If you do not want to be audio and video recorded, please inform the investigator, and your interview will not be recorded.

**What are the expected risks for participation?**

The primary risk of participation in this study is a potential loss of confidentiality. Some of the interview questions may make you feel uncomfortable. You do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer. If you are upset, please inform the investigator immediately.

**Are there any benefits to participating?**

No direct benefits are expected for individual participants.

**Storing study information for future use**

We will store your information to study in the future. Your information will be labeled with a code and not your name. Your information will be stored in a password-protected or locked file.

We may share your information with other researchers without asking for your permission, but the shared information will never contain information that could identify you.

**Will I be paid for participation?**

No, you will not be paid for participation.

**Study contact information**

If you have any questions about the research, you can contact the Principal Investigator, Shontaye Witcher, or by phone at 231.766.1188. You can also contact Shontaye's adviser, Dr. Rema Reynolds, at [rreyno15@emich.edu](mailto:rreyno15@emich.edu) or by phone at 734.487-2713.

For questions about your rights as a research subject, contact the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee at [human.subjects@emich.edu](mailto:human.subjects@emich.edu) or by phone at 734-487-3090.

**Voluntary participation**

Participation in this research study is your choice. You may refuse to participate at any time, even after signing this form, with no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may choose to leave the study at any time with no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you leave the study, the information you provided will be kept confidential. You may request, in writing, that your identifiable information be destroyed. However, we cannot destroy any information that has already been published.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read this form. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and am satisfied with the answers I received. I give my consent to participate in this research study.



**Signatures**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Subject

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

I have explained the research to the subject and answered all his/her questions. I will give a copy of the signed consent form to the subject.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix C  
Online Interview Script

## Appendix C

## Online Interview Script

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**RESEARCH @ EMU**

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## START BROADCAST

## LOGIN

Remc.adobeconnect.com/specialeducation

████████████████████

████

## PREPARE/TEST

1. Auto promote participants to presenters
2. check your sound – turn on microphone, camera
3. check their sound, turn on microphone and camera
4. Start recording

**INTERVIEW SCRIPT -- START RECORDING**

## Welcome &amp; Introductions

My name is Shontaye Witcher. Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview to collect qualitative data on your institution's programs and services surrounding students with ASD. I am a PhD student at EMU and I am interested in the topic of Autism Spectrum Disorder. I value your leadership by offering student outreach programs in your institution. Please note that I am recording this broadcast. We will start with tour of Adobe Connect, a web conferencing tool that utilizes pods for our workspace. We will be using the chat, notes, camera, file share and upload, and share pods during this broadcast.

Additional copies of the Consent to Participate, Site Participation, Invitation, and Interview Questions are available within the Adobe Connect workspace. You can download additional copies at any time.

Should you have further questions related to this study, please contact my chair, Dr. Rema Reynolds, Eastern Michigan University, College of Education, 310 Porter Building, Ypsilanti, MI 48197, 734.487.2713, email: rreyno15@emich.edu, where there is an IRB on file detailing the context of my study.

You may choose to leave the broadcast at any time if you feel uncomfortable by closing the program window using the "X" in the top right corner of Adobe Connect. There are no anticipated risks to you for participating.

Specific to the Adobe Connect workspace,

1. Your **role** within Adobe Connect is "presenter", which allows you to upload files and also to use the camera and microphone. Please do not make any changes to the workspace by closing or moving pods during the broadcast.
2. During the broadcast you are able to **upload documents** that you feel provide additional support for any of the questions during this interview. For example, implementation artifacts, parent communications, and etc. to assist the researcher in

- understanding how you support students. You may also email documents after the broadcast within 72 hours to [switchel@emich.edu](mailto:switchel@emich.edu)
- (Please note, there is no “r” in the email address).
3. To enable your **microphone**, use the microphone button in the top bar menu. When you are not speaking, please mute/turn off your microphone. (RP Note: Start sharing microphones.)
  4. To enable your **camera**, use the camera button in the top bar menu. You will also need to click on “Start My Camera”, “Start Sharing”. The use of video is **OPTIONAL**.
  5. We will use the **Chat** pod for adding comments as well as record your conversation using the microphone feature during the broadcast.
    - Please take a moment to introduce yourself and how long you have been with your organization (Interview Question #1).
  6. This broadcast will last for up to 60 minutes and be **recorded**. As outlined in your Consent Form, there are no anticipated risks for you to participate in this study. The recording from this broadcast will be transcribed within 72 hours of the broadcast, and only accessible to the researcher through a secure login.

**Do you have any questions before we begin? Do I have your permission to proceed?**

Appendix D

Online Interview Instructions for Participants

## Appendix D

## Online Interview Instructions for Participants

Please join me in an Adobe Connect session by clicking on the following link:

[REDACTED]

Meeting Name: Special Education – ASD Workgroup

Summary: This room was created to meet regarding students with Autism and transition

Invited By: Shontaye Witcher

Contact me: [switchel1@emich.edu](mailto:switchel1@emich.edu) (email) or by phone at [REDACTED]

When: October 29, 2019

Time Zone: Eastern Time (US and Canada)

**PLUGINS:** If you are asked to download a plugin, please do so.

**COMPUTER W/ CAMERA/MICROPHONE:** Please use a computer that has a microphone and speakers, or a headset with a microphone. Tip: You should have the headset/speakers/microphone attached prior to turning your computer on so that they are recognized and enabled.

**LOGIN:** Please login as a GUEST using your FIRST and LAST name.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Please note that every effort will be made to maintain your confidentiality and all information gathered from this session will be kept within a secure login and coded to protect your anonymity in the findings.

**TESTING:**

If you have never attended an Adobe Connect meeting before:

Test your connection:

[REDACTED]

Get a quick overview: [REDACTED]

Adobe, the Adobe logo, Acrobat and Adobe Connect are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Adobe Systems Incorporated in the United States and/or other countries.

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Appendix E

Invitation to Participate in an Online Interview

## Appendix E

## Invitation to Participate in an Online Interview

Hello Higher Education Disability Professional,

You are invited to participate in an Adobe Connect virtual interview for a doctoral student's dissertation research. The purpose of this study is to interview Higher Education Disability Professionals of disability services offices in bachelor-degree granting (or higher) institutions to learn your perceptions of transition for freshmen Autism Spectrum Disorder students. This research would investigate which types of resources and strategies contribute to the retention of the registered ASD students within your office. Some questions inquire about challenges, accommodations, needed resources, and leadership.

If you agree to participate in this study, you would meet with the researcher and answer 10 - 20 open-ended semi-structured questions. It will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete. The questions asked in the interview will allow me to gain more insight into your services and the inner workings of your department. Conversations will be digitally recorded and transcribed. I will also enable you to use the Chatbox to contribute additional commentary or questions or feedback outside the realm of your 10-20 interview questions. Also, you may upload any documents that you have that demonstrated, support, or contribute to the conversation about students with ASD. I will send you the link to connect in the virtual classroom the day before the interview.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and anonymous. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project. However, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you can withdraw from the survey at any point.

Your contribution is essential to the study to provide practitioners with more information regarding what types of services correlate to higher graduation rates for students with disabilities. Your survey responses will be strictly confidential, and data from this research will be reported only in aggregate. You will be asked to sign an "Informed Consent Form," indicating your consent to participate in this research. If you have any questions about the study, you can contact the principal investigator, Shontaye M. Witcher at [REDACTED] [switchel@emich.edu](mailto:switchel@emich.edu) or the dissertation chair, Dr. Rema Reynolds at [reyno15@emich.edu](mailto:reyno15@emich.edu) or by telephone at [REDACTED].

For questions about your rights as a research subject, you can contact the Eastern Michigan University Office of Research Compliance at [human.subjects@emich.edu](mailto:human.subjects@emich.edu) or by phone at 734.487.3090.

You may also choose to receive access to the dissertation upon completion if you are interested in the results.

Thank you very much for your time and support.

Shontaye Witcher  
Doctoral student at Eastern Michigan University  
School of Educational Leadership



Appendix F

Interview Questions related to Topic/Phenomenon

## Appendix F

## Interview Questions related to Topic/Phenomenon

I will begin by asking you to share a bit of information about yourself and your position.

- 1) Describe your role, and how long have you been with the organization?
- 2) Describe your perceptions on the struggles of students with ASD?
- 3) What are barriers faced by students with ASD when transitioning to college?
- 4) When should preparation begin for students with ASD who plan to transition to college?
- 5) Do freshmen students entering college have an understanding of accommodations, and how to get them when they get to college?
- 6) What are some critical issues students with ASD need to consider when applying for admission into a university?
- 7) How do you build ASD student's social and communication skills?
- 8) What types of intervention, peer support, and collaborative instructional practices are in place to support students with ASD?
- 9) Has the number of students with ASD entering your institution increased, decreased, or stayed the same in the past few years?
- 10) Can offering additional support services beyond the recommended accommodations for students with ASD help with retention? Please give me an example.
- 11) Can you describe how the university supports students' social transition? Academic transition?

- 12) Describe how you evaluate the effectiveness of social, academic, mental health, and general well-being of students with ASD?
- 13) How do you educate new students about options/resources?
- 14) How do you eliminate barriers; improve communication?
- 15) How do you view the quality of supports received by students as they transition to college?
- 16) How do you bridge supports between high school and postsecondary?
- 17) If resources were not a concern, what interventions would you suggest to help students with ASD make a successful transition to college?
- 18) How do you define a successful transition to college?
- 19) Describe any programs or initiatives where you have seen success for students with ASD?
- 20) Describe parent participation at the collegiate level for students with ASD?
- 21) Describe the successes or challenges for students with ASD based on their subgroup (gender, race or socioeconomic status)

Thank you for participating in this interview.

Appendix G

Transition Planning Tool for Students with Autism Transitioning

**Appendix G**

**Transition Planning Tool for Students with Autism Transitioning**

Student Name:

School District Name:

DOB:

IEP Meeting Date

Colleges of interest:

**Transition  
Student's Preferences, Needs and Interests**

Was the student invited to the IEP meeting?

If so, what does the student know about their diagnosis?

Did the student attend the IEP meeting?

*If no, describe the step taken to ensure that the student's preference and interests were considered.*

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Postsecondary Goals Based on student's Interest, Preferences Needs and Interests</b></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Present Levels of Functional Performance:</b></p>
<p>1. PostSecondary Education Goals: (e.g. 2- or 4-year college)</p>	<p>Current Academic and Functional Levels in Preparation for Post-Secondary Education:</p> <p>Can this student independently pay attention in class and take notes?</p>
<p>2. Study skills and time management</p>	<p>What are the study habits and time management skills used by this student?</p> <p>Does the student keep up with and respond to emails and phone calls?</p> <p>Does the student have a method of organization? (etc., planner, calendar)</p>

<p>3. Post-Secondary Employment Goal:</p>	<p>Current Job Skills in Preparation for Post-Secondary Employment: Can this student work on campus or start an internship?</p> <p>Can this student keep a healthy sleep and eating schedule?</p>
<p>4. Post-Secondary Independent Living Goal. If Needed:</p>	<p>Current Home/Independent Living Skills in Preparation for Post-Secondary Independent Living: Can this student wake themselves up in the morning and take care of their hygiene</p>
<p>5. Future Community Participation or social activities:</p>	<p>Current Community Participation in Preparation for Post-Secondary Independent Living:</p> <p>How often does the student interact with other students and friends?</p> <p>What to the student do typically when they socialize?</p>

6. Self-Advocacy	What self-advocacy skills are learned? Please explain
7. Parent Involvement	How actively involved are the student's parents?
8. Behaviors	List the behaviors that affect this student. (etc. classroom interruptions, violation of personal space,
9. Mental Health	How does this student manage their mental health?

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**Secondary Transition**

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<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Accommodations used in each grade</b>
9 <sup>th</sup>	
10 <sup>th</sup>	
11 <sup>th</sup>	
12 <sup>th</sup>	



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**Transition Resources need in Postsecondary Education**


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Transition Area	Services	Begin Date/End Date	Agency/Person Responsible
Instruction			
Community Experiences			
Employment			
Mental Health			
Executive Functioning			
Daily Living (if appropriate)			


When is the student planning to visit a disability office? Please include IEP and (documentation from a licensed physician, psychiatrist, social worker, or other health professionals)

**Appendix H**

**Transition Tool for Students with Autism Transitioning to Post-Secondary**

**Appendix H**

**Transition Tool for Students with Autism Transitioning to Post-Secondary**

	<i>High School</i> <b>Secondary Education</b>	 <i>College</i> <b>Postsecondary Education</b>
<b>Admission</b>	Most schools do not require admission criteria unless you are attending a school out of district or private schooling.	You must meet the minimum grade point average and SAT requirement.
<b>Identification</b>	Schools provide and pay for testing for eligibility of services and prescribe accommodations.	<p>The student self-identifies, advocates for accommodations, and seeks out services by registering with Disability Services Office. The student must provide documentation. The laws change to <b>The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990</b>, which is a federal civil rights law structured to offer equal opportunities for all people with disabilities. Legally, an individual with a disability is a person who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities;</li> <li>Has a record of such an impairment;</li> <li>Regarded as having such an impairment.</li> </ul>
<b>Privacy</b>	Information is shared with parents/guardians/support team. The student should be allowed to participate in this process in high school.	<b>The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)</b> does not allow an institution to share information without the student’s approval. Students can sign documents at most colleges to collaborate with the DS office.

<p><b>Documentation</b></p>	<p>(Individualized Education Plan) I.E.P. <b>The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)</b> is a federal law that governs any special education service or policy for children ages 3 to graduation (or until age 21 if the student remains in high school until then). Documentation focuses on determining whether the student is eligible for services based on specific disability categories in I.D.E.A. <b>Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973</b> (504 plans) protects individuals from discrimination based on their disabilities. This Act governs any public school or college that accepts any federal financial assistance, but the Act itself provides no funding for the schools or colleges affected by its mandates.</p>	<p>Documentation requirements vary from institution to institution. The student must contact the school of interest to determine requirements. Some schools have documentation limitations generally between 3 to 5 years and do not accept 504 plans.</p>
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<p><b>Diagnostic Testing</b></p>	<p>Schools pay for the process of diagnostic testing. Keep all records in the event the student requires accommodations in college.</p>	<p>Students or parents must pay for their diagnostic testing and submit to the DS office for accommodation</p>
<p><b>Eligibility for Services/ Placement and Accommodations</b></p>	<p>Parental guidance is expected as parents, guardians, and teachers are the primary advocates. The student should be included in this process to help them understand their disability.</p>	<p>Most schools allow parents in the initial meeting; however, parents are not included regarding eligibility for services. All accommodations requested may not be available. There are equivalent accommodations to help the student be on the same level as other students.</p>
<p><b>Instructor Awareness</b></p>	<p>Teachers are aware of your specific difficulties and requests for intervention. Students may even know that the student is receiving special education.</p>	<p>Students must disclose their disability. The student must advocate for their accommodations and discuss accommodations with the professor. This is strictly confidential.</p>
<p><b>Altering Courses and Programs</b></p>	<p>Courses and programs are modified for specific needs. The student may leave the room for special services.</p>	<p>Take courses offered, not fundamentally altered. All accommodations must be reasonable.</p>

<b>Test Modifications</b>	Students may eliminate questions, unlimited time, extra explanations, ability to take tests in the resource room, open book and note tests, take their exam orally, etc.	Accommodations related to testing are often limited to extended time 1.5X, distraction reduced environment, and readers for the test can read the exam precisely as written. The readers can not explain questions or assist with definitions.
<b>Homework Modifications</b>	Homework has fewer questions to answer, alternative assignments, extra time to turn in homework, and contacts to parents if assignments are not turned in, etc.	There are no modifications to the length of assignments. DS office may grant extended time for in-class assignments, but the professor has the final say about extended time for homework and make -up exams submissions.
<b>Resource Room</b>	Support may come from resource room and support professionals, including Resource room and support professionals. Students may work with professionals in their classrooms.	No resource room. Referrals are made to individual offices for academic support. Academic support at colleges may be tutoring, counseling center, career resources, writing center, math center, and academic advisors.
<b>Tutors</b>	Tutoring or outside resources and most schools recommend working with the teacher or must be paid by the family.	Tutors are an extra service at colleges. This helps students with managing study time.

<b>Reminders and Deadlines</b>	Parents and teachers remind for exam dates and assignment. Some parent deadlines. Some schools send notes to parents.	The student must keep track of their exam dates and assignment deadlines by referring to the course syllabus and discussing with parents.
<b>Discipline/Missing class/behaviors</b>	Expect to be disciplined for skipping class, missing assignments, and behaviors.	Professors establish their attendance policy. The rules that must be followed according to OCR. Is there regular classroom interaction between the instructor and the students and among the students themselves?
<b>Transportation</b>	Schools provide transportation to and from school.	Transportation is not a required accommodation; however, some colleges provide accommodation as a courtesy; however, some colleges offer as a courtesy on their campus or access to public transportation.
<b>Personal Aides</b>	Personal aides may be provided in the classroom/academic or personal care issues.	Personal aides are not provided; however, some schools allow aids to assist students with living skills. The university does not pay for this service.

<p><b>Alternative Textbooks</b></p>	<p>Schools provide free alternative textbooks using a variety of resources.</p>	<p>Students are required to purchase or rent their books, provide proof of ownership or rental, and then request books in an alternative format.</p>
<p><b>Housing</b></p>	<p>Provided my parents or guardians</p>	<p>Students must register with the Housing Office of the school of choice. You may be required to register with the DS office for housing requests such as single rooms, dining options or roommates with DS office to request housing accommodations.</p>
<p><b>Modifications/ Accommodations</b></p>	<p>Have a set routine, extended time to complete the assignment or test, physical arrangement of the classroom and preferential seating, varying of activities, allowing for different ways of responding, format of materials is changed to meet the students' needs, reinforcements provided, Varying forms of instructional delivery, assignments are changed using lower reading levels, testing adaptations are used, reductions of classwork or homework, Assistance with specialized/alternative curriculum written at a lower level, grading is subject to different standards, and parents are notified.</p>	<p>Alternative Format Books, Alternative test-taking with extended time and specialized software, Assistive Technology, Learning and Study Skills, Note-taking Assistance, Resource Agents and Liaisons, Tutoring, Van Transportation Service, Frequent Breaks, and documentation to professors.</p>

**Appendix I**

**ASD Parent Preparation Tool**

**Appendix I****ASD Parent Preparation Tool****ASD Parent Transition  
Tool**

- Updated Documentation
- Daily Living – Personal Etiquette
- Organizational Skills
  - Planners
  - Time Management
- Mental Health Therapist
- Personal Care
  - Food preparation, laundry, hygiene
- Self-Advocacy
- Social Engagement
- Parent Support Nearby
- Peer Mentor
- Healthy Relationships and Boundaries
- Career Focus
- Behavior
- Transportation
- Ability to make appointments
- Read Emails/Text Messages
- Interest in Attending College
- A week without parent support
- Understand Directions
- Understand Technology



**Appendix J**

**Informal Inventory of Skills for Students with ASD**

**Appendix J**

**Informal Inventory of Skills for Students with ASD**

**INFORMAL INVENTORY OF INDEPENDENCE AND  
SELF-ADVOCACY SKILLS  
FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM**

Developed by: Shontaye Witcher, MSW, EdS  
The author grants permission for use in K-12 educational settings.

This inventory is intended to aid collaboration among students, parents, and educational team members to determine educational services and appropriate goals for the student’s Individual Education Plan. It is imperative to include the student’s input and to recognize that even very young children should be building skills related to independence and self-advocacy. The discussion should consist of what would be considered appropriate for the child’s age, cognitive abilities, and mode of communication when determining the items that may or may not be applicable.

**Place an X to show (1) having a lack of skill/dependence to (5) having mastery of skill/independence.**

**Student Independence**

1. Takes responsibility for their needs by discussing with teacher’s assistance	NA	1	2	3	4	5
2. Takers responsibility for completing daily assignments and projects.	NA	1	2	3	4	5
3. Keeps track of assignments and materials and completes tasks on time.	NA	1	2	3	4	5
4. Follows schedule and manages time independently.	NA	1	2	3	4	5
5. Attempts to follow directions without assistance.	NA	1	2	3	4	5
6. Ability to make appointments	NA	1	2	3	4	5
7. Reads emails/text messages	NA	1	2	3	4	5
8. A week without parent support	NA	1	2	3	4	5
9. Understands directions	NA	1	2	3	4	5
10. Attends to personal care	NA	1	2	3	4	5
11. Healthy Relationship Boundaries	NA	1	2	3	4	5

**Services and Accommodations**

1. Understands technology	NA	1	2	3	4	5
2. Expresses personal opinions concerning current educational program / services.	NA	1	2	3	4	5
3. Notifies the appropriate person to request additional explanations or tutoring.	NA	1	2	3	4	5
4. Advocates for accommodations. (i.e., extended time on tests, preferential seating, note-taker, alternative format books, group work)	NA	1	2	3	4	5
5. Explain his/her needs to a new teacher or staff member.	NA	1	2	3	4	5
6. Explains disability and the best way to assist.	NA	1	2	3	4	5
7. Understands technology	NA	1	2	3	4	5
8. Attends and participates in IEP meetings and transition planning	NA	1	2	3	4	5
9. Updated Documentation (year)						

**Independence: Peer Interaction**

1. Understands technology	NA	1	2	3	4	5
2. Expresses personal opinions concerning current educational program and services.	NA	1	2	3	4	5
3. Notifies the appropriate person to request additional explanations or tutoring.	NA	1	2	3	4	5
4. Advocates for accommodations. (i.e., extended time on tests, preferential	NA	1	2	3	4	5

**Independence: Community**

1. Follows expected procedures and etiquette	NA	1	2	3	4	5
2. Connected to resources for students with Autism	NA	1	2	3	4	5
3. Knows rights as related to the laws for students with Autism	NA	1	2	3	4	5
4. Interested in attending postsecondary education	NA	1	2	3	4	5
5. Uses a counselor for mental health services	NA	1	2	3	4	5
6. Independently communicates in the community. (orders in restaurants, makes purchases, understands money	NA	1	2	3	4	5
7. Interacts with other students and friends	NA	1	2	3	4	5
8. Manages mental health	NA	1	2	3	4	5

Total Points Earned

There is a total of 23 items. Subtract the number of NA responses from 23 then average the student's responses. Compare to the continuum below to monitor growth over time.

<b>0-1.5 Lacks independence and self-advocacy skills</b>	<b>1.5-3.0 Some independence and self-advocacy skills</b>	<b>3.0-4.0 Growing advocacy and independence</b>	<b>4.0-5.0 Substantial advocacy and independence</b>

Based on the findings of the inventory, the identified skill and knowledge deficits need to be addressed collaboratively. List the action steps that the following people will make to ensure progress on goals.

Student

Classroom teacher(s):

Other special education or related services providers:

Family Member(s):

Other comments: