

STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING SELF-DETERMINATION IN STUDENTS WITH  
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACULTY AND  
DISABILITY SUPPORT STAFF

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A Dissertation  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctorate of Education

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

FACULTY STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING SELF-DETERMINATION IN  
STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE FACULTY AND  
DISABILITY SUPPORT STAFF

presented by T. Michelle Hudgens,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of education,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DEDICATION

For Mom and Dad, who taught me the importance of being a lifelong learner and caring for those around me.

I also owe a huge thank you to Alex, for listening to me process everything I was learning the last five years, and especially to Jenn, for being my biggest cheerleader and always swiveling when I need to talk.

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Faculty Strategies for Fostering Self-Determination in Students with Autism Spectrum  
Disorder:

A Qualitative Study of Community College Faculty and Disability Support Staff

T. Michelle Hudgens

Dr. Cynthia MacGregor, Dissertation Supervisor

ABSTRACT

Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are enrolling in college more frequently, yet their graduation rates remain low. One reason posited is lack of self-determination (SD) skills, which help students act on goals. This study investigated how faculty at a community college support students with ASD in developing SD skills. The study used Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) framework for students' with disabilities transition to community college to evaluate data regarding how faculty accomplish this goal and how they communicate with DS staff. The study used basic qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews with 23 faculty, five DS staff, and two education site directors. Findings include that faculty use a variety of strategies to communicate with students, yet faculty feel tension between helping students regulate behaviors and allowing autonomy. All three groups of participants indicate that rapport with and trust for each other are important, but when these qualities are absent, some faculty find help through informal supports. All groups of participants indicate that while accommodation letters are a good starting place to support students with ASD, they provide little help on how to reinforce SD skills. Ultimately, accommodations are supplemented by faculty opting to work with students beyond the letter.

SECTION ONE:  
INTRODUCTION TO DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

## **Background of the Study**

Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are enrolling in college in record numbers (LeGary, 2017; McKeon et al., 2013; Shmulsky et al., 2017). Recent data indicates that 1 in 68 people are diagnosed with ASD in the United States (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Reports indicate that students with ASD have a postsecondary education completion rate of 40% (Newman et al., 2011), which contrasts with approximately 60% completion rate for neurotypical peers (U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Studies cite a number of reasons why students with ASD are not successfully completing college degrees. These include lack of knowledge about rights and support services as well as lack of self-advocacy skills (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Cai & Richdale, 2015), among other reasons. In addition, these students are less likely than other students with disabilities to participate in transition planning services which facilitate the move to a college setting (Hendrickson et al., 2017). This lack of participation may be because some students lack the social communication skills (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) to navigate college structures, such as self-disclosing with disability support offices (Hendrickson et al., 2017) or interacting and building relationships with faculty. Newman et al. (2011) reinforced this in their findings that students with ASD are less likely to receive help with postsecondary schoolwork from instructors than other peers with disabilities. Furthermore, students' with ASD transition to college at a particularly vulnerable time when core ASD symptoms may plateau or worsen after adolescence (White et al., 2016).

Complicating the issue further, faculty believe they lack the necessary knowledge to support students with ASD or struggle with their attitudes towards them. Tipton and Blacher (2014) found through their survey that faculty had limited knowledge about autism, including educational interventions. McKeon et al.'s (2013) survey reinforced this: in spite of over half of their faculty respondents stating they adapted instructional styles to support students with ASD, many reported they wanted more training about how to meet these students' needs. Furthermore, faculty may be skeptical of non-visible disabilities, as may be the case with autism (Jensen et al., 2004). Gibbons et al. (2015) reported that faculty in their survey were concerned about integrating students with invisible disabilities, including students with ASD, into their classrooms and whether these students would be successful. Perhaps as a result, the faculty members also indicated a desire to learn more about assisting these students on campus (Gibbons et al., 2015).

Current conversations regarding assisting students with disabilities, including those diagnosed with ASD, in the college setting have highlighted the challenges these students face. However, there is a paucity of research regarding how to address these hardships in the classroom and how faculty and disability support staff assist students and each other. This study contributes to the conversation by investigating how faculty are helping students overcome these challenges by fostering students' development of self-determination (SD) skills and what institutional resources faculty are utilizing in the process.



## **Statement of the Problem**

The focus on students with ASD has been conducted mostly in elementary and secondary settings (Glennon, 2016). With the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADAA) in 2008 which resulted in increased access to college for students with disabilities, more students with ASD are now attending college (LeGary, 2017). Despite this growing rate of students with ASD who are transitioning from high school to college, there is limited research into these students' experiences in postsecondary institutions (Elias & White, 2018; Gelbar et al., 2014). Within the last two decades, emerging research on students with ASD in postsecondary institutions has primarily focused on identifying the needs and challenges they face (Jackson et al., 2018; White et al., 2016) and their support systems, including family and academic supports (Anderson & Butt, 2017). Research has also focused on the students and parents (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Jackson et al., 2018), with some research including support staff at postsecondary institutions (White et al., 2016). What has been lacking in the research, though, is postsecondary faculty's role in supporting students with ASD.

Within the research scope for students with ASD attending postsecondary institutions, there is also little investigation focusing on two-year colleges. Anderson and Butt (2017) noted the flexibility of community colleges as a good fit for students with ASD because their low cost meant students could take fewer classes without financial aid concerns or need for a full course load to live in campus housing. Low tuition also means students are more able to take developmental coursework which may be required before college-level courses can be taken (White et al., 2016). While community colleges are

seen as a good fit, at least financially, for students' with ASD needs, there is insufficient data regarding students' retention or graduation rates or how well these colleges are in fact serving students' needs (Anderson & Butt, 2017).

This lack of research also presents challenges for college support staff as well as faculty who must be able to adapt to students' learning needs (Jackson et al., 2018).

While students with ASD have identified faculty as a primary source of informational support (LeGary, 2017), many students have also acknowledged difficulties communicating effectively with faculty (Cai & Richdale, 2015), have sensed negative attitudes from faculty (Sarrett, 2018), and even felt stigmatization from faculty behavior (Cox et al., 2017). This may be reflected in Glennon's (2016) survey which found that college personnel, including faculty, are not sure what supports students with ASD need in a college setting and wanted more information. Instructors are a primary point of contact for students with ASD within the institution and play a critical role in setting expectations as well as facilitating student learning. Glennon (2016) noted that the majority of college personnel in her survey had received multiple trainings on ASD, yet they wanted more information.

Current research has also identified students' potential lack of self-determination (SD) skills as a barrier to their postsecondary success (Richman et al., 2014). SD skills include attitudes as well as actions that assist students in setting goals and taking actions to accomplish these goals. Studies have linked SD to greater retention for students with ASD in two-year colleges (Jameson, 2007). Furthermore, students with disabilities also identified SD as crucial to their college success, particularly building relationships with faculty (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Jameson, 2007). Getzel and Thoma (2008) reported that

students with disabilities perceived faculty as not understanding their particular disability or the accommodations the students were to receive, and SD skills became important for these students in addressing this challenge.

Furthermore, the current growth of online education can potentially create further challenges for students with ASD, particularly since SD skills are crucial for online learning. *Inside Higher Education* recently reported on the continued growth of online teaching with survey results which indicates that within six years, the percentage of faculty members teaching online had increased 16%, from 30 to 46% (Lederman, 2019). With higher education's continued focus on online learning, students with ASD are likely to participate in these courses. Yet as of now there appears to be only one study specifically focused on this growing area and the impact on students with ASD.

This study, conducted by Richardson (2017), investigated students with ASD and postsecondary online learning at an online open-enrollment institution in the United Kingdom. Richardson (2017) argued that distance learning may be a preferred form of education for students with social anxiety, including many with autism. Richardson (2017) also found that students with autism were as likely as non-disabled peers to pass completed online learning modules. While corroborating research is minimal, this supports the argument that online learning may be a beneficial option for students with ASD; further research is necessary to learn how faculty can facilitate online learning for these students.

Research from both the faculty and student perspectives reveals the breadth of challenges that postsecondary institutions face in fully addressing the needs of students with ASD. For faculty, this includes lack of knowledge about ASD, accommodations, or

how to support students. Therefore, one step in furthering this investigation is to learn how faculty are adapting in their work with students to promote skills for college success, such as fostering self-determination (SD), both in seated and online environments.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to learn how faculty help students with ASD foster SD skills. In current higher education literature, SD development involves “helping students understand their strengths and limitations while holding the belief that they are capable of succeeding” (Goudreau & Knight, 2018, p. 382). SD behaviors include goal setting, decision-making, and problem solving. The ability to enact these behaviors comes from a sense of autonomy which requires a certain level of self-awareness and self-esteem (Wehmeyer et al., 2018). SD has been of particular interest for researchers and practitioners working with all populations of students with disabilities at the secondary and postsecondary levels as it has been linked to increased school and post-school outcomes (Chou et al., 2017; Kim, 2019).

Furthermore, experts argue that SD should be developed alongside executive function (EF) skills, which allow individuals to enact self-determination (Goudreau & Knight, 2018; Parker & Boutelle, 2009). EF skills may include organization, time management, motivation, and ability to shift between tasks (Goudreau & Knight, 2018; Parker & Boutelle, 2009). These skills are crucial for college students with ASD since EF and SD lead to lower stress levels (Kim, 2019) which in turn benefits greater academic success (Parker & Boutelle, 2009). Not only are these skills important for academic work, they are also crucial for future financial independence and improved quality of life (Kim, 2019; Parker & Boutelle, 2009). According to Rando et al. (2016), students with ASD are

more likely to lack these skills and, as a result, are at greater risk of not being successful in a postsecondary classroom setting.

Preliminary research has stated that SD skills can be promoted in young adult and adult students with ASD through interventions (Fullerton & Coyne, 1999; Kim, 2019; Wehmeyer et al., 2018). Fullerton and Coyne (1999) were among the earliest researchers to investigate practices for helping students with ASD develop SD skills. They found that after 10 workshop sessions lasting two to three hours, each focusing on a different topic related to self-determination, young adults with ASD who participated in the sessions and their parents reported improvements in the young adults' understanding of strengths and weaknesses, ability to communicate, and goal setting.

Despite the success of such interventions, few postsecondary institutions offer services such as these kinds of workshops. Brown (2017) found that two-year public colleges are providing reasonable accommodations for students with ASD as required by federal law; however, the accommodations may not address the full range of needs these students may have (Brown, 2017). Brown (2017) noted that this may be due to smaller population sizes of students with ASD at colleges or fewer disability support office staff to implement these supports. As a result, faculty may often have to fill the gap by finding ways to support students with ASD in developing critical SD skills for their college success. This study investigates how faculty may do this and what supports they use in order to assist these students in developing SD skills.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study of general education community college faculty are

1. How do faculty report fostering self-determination skills for students with ASD?
2. What is the nature of the ongoing communication between faculty and disability support staff in assisting students with ASD?
3. What are the experiences of faculty and disability support staff regarding disability support access and accommodations?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The framework that guided this study is Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) conceptual framework (GWL) for students' with disabilities transition to community college. Garrison-Wade and Lehmann (2009) developed their framework to make recommendations which will improve students' with disabilities transition from secondary to postsecondary institutions, particularly two-year colleges. Their research was guided by the belief that understanding what enhances students with disabilities success in the classroom will provide curricular and pedagogical benefits for all students (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). The GWL framework was designed using the researchers' original study combined with meta-analysis of research literature on students with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary institutions (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009).

The researchers concluded that there are several elements across both secondary and postsecondary schools for assisting students with disabilities in a successful transition to college. Three recommendations that impact colleges specifically, though, are development of self-determination skills for students, ongoing communication between faculty and staff about the organizational supports both provide to students with disabilities, and improved awareness of access and accommodations (which may include

enhanced awareness and training for faculty or mentoring and goal setting supports for students).

First, the GWL framework noted the importance of helping students with disabilities develop SD skills. SD is noted as crucial for college transition, since these skills include regulating emotions and behaviors as well as self-advocating in order to accomplish goals (Qian et al., 2018). This part of the framework has been reinforced by other studies focusing on students' with disabilities success in college (Elias & White, 2018; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Jameson, 2007). Garrison-Wade and Lehmann (2009) emphasized that secondary institutions must assist students with disabilities with developing self-advocacy which is a specific component of SD behaviors. More importantly for the purposes of this study, though, in order to promote college success, postsecondary schools must create environments where students can practice and use these skills as well as have avenues to engage with faculty and staff in order to communicate their needs (Garrison-Wade, 2012; Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Mumbardó-Adam et al., 2020).

Oertle and Bragg (2014) built on this component of the GWL framework by arguing that goal-planning, another characteristic of SD, for students with disabilities must be continuous as they transition from secondary schools to community colleges. Furthermore, they noted the importance of instruction in SD skills, rather than just providing the environment to practice them, and training faculty and staff to assist with this development. Fleming et al. (2017) called for support staff and faculty to model essential SD and EF skills and behaviors rather than simply providing accommodations. They noted that modeling behaviors may include encouraging students to build

relationships with faculty which is vital to college success, and they pointed out that doing so necessitates the use of SD skills (Fleming et al., 2017). Thus, the process of modeling and developing skills becomes iterative.

Interwoven with SD instruction and support, according to the GWL framework, is the need for communication across institutions. Garrison-Wade and Lehmann (2012) explained that communication may be between secondary and post-secondary schools to understand student needs and develop services. Equally as important, though, is inter-institutional communication, specifically between faculty and disability support staff. Garrison-Wade & Lehmann (2009) noted that communication must occur between these stakeholders in order to address potential structural barriers and survey what support needs faculty may have.

Oertle and Bragg (2014) also reinforced the need for disability support staff and faculty to work together and communicate regularly about meeting the needs of students with disabilities while also sustaining academic rigor. Encouraging open communication is crucial because, as Shelly (2018) found in her investigation into two-year faculty's perceptions of accommodating students with disabilities, faculty may not regularly seek out support from a disability support office. Many faculty believed the support staff were too busy to assist them, or vice versa, faculty felt too overworked to be able to meet with support staff for assistance (Shelly, 2018). Yet Shelly's (2018) research found an overwhelming theme of faculty's desire for more open communication so they could gain important information to assist their students.

Beyond communication between faculty and disability support staff, research building upon Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) framework has called for more



communication between students and faculty/staff. Other researchers found that including students in the conversation regarding the creation of their accommodation plan may help them develop SD skills because they must first, self-advocate, and second, be specific about what resources and services may work best for them (Shepler & Woosley, 2012). Furthermore, students with disabilities who had rapport with faculty members were more likely to be retained longer and have higher GPAs (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012). Mamiseishvili and Koch's (2012) survey of students with disabilities at two-year colleges noted, though, that many are not meeting with their instructors, advisers, or support staff, thus reinforcing the importance of building these relationships.

Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) framework for students with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary institutions provides a conceptual framework for understanding the importance of faculty support for students with disabilities, particularly students with ASD. Their recommendations regarding the fostering of SD skills for students and communication between stakeholders at the postsecondary level informed gathering and analyzing data for this study.

### **Design of the Study**

Since this study focused on (a) faculty's experiences helping students with ASD develop SD skills and (b) faculty's and staff's perceptions of communication and awareness of accommodations and disability support access, a basic qualitative research methodology was relevant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that basic qualitative research uncovers how participants make meaning of their experiences and construct knowledge which is relevant for understanding how faculty make meaning of their experiences supporting students in developing SD. In

addition, since Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) framework notes the importance of faculty and staff communication, qualitative research was also a useful methodology for gathering first-hand data from participants about how they perceive their interactions and their awareness of available institutional supports. To accomplish these goals, the study focused on faculty and staff at a Midwestern community college and gathered data in the form of semi-structured interviews with faculty and disability support staff.

### **Setting**

Participants for this study were faculty, staff, and administrators (on sites where disability support staff are not available), from a regionally accredited two-year community college made up of three campuses, two education centers, and an online "campus." The college is an open-enrollment institution, and, according to the college's website, it serves approximately 12,000 students (of which over 5,700 are full time and over 6,000 are part time). Each of the college's three campuses has a dedicated disability support office, though the office functions differently at each campus. On the largest campus, it is a standalone office responsible for assisting students and faculty with support services, while at the other two campuses, it is combined with library, testing, and tutoring services. Each office at the three campuses is overseen by a separate director. The two additional education centers are served by disability support counselors housed at the largest campus, and the site directors are the primary point of contact for students with disabilities. Current literature from the college suggests that over 600 students use disability services across the entire college. Using the three campuses, two centers, and online "campus" for this study helped strengthen credibility for the study as

data was triangulated across multiple sites which have similar disability support services in place (Shenton, 2004).

### **Participants**

Two categories of participants took part in this study: (a) administration and staff for disability support services and directors of education sites and (b) faculty from across the institution. The GWL framework states that for students with disabilities to be successful in college, they must develop self-determination, and it is the college's responsibility to help foster that by modeling and providing a space to develop SD (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). The GWL framework also states that faculty and staff must communicate with each other to develop an environment for students to develop these skills (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). To understand how the two are interacting to communicate, support staff and faculty were essential participants for this study.

The first group of participants were support staff for each of the college's three campuses and the directors of the two education sites plus the online program. These groups were identified as participants for similar reasons. They primarily support institutional policies regarding disability services for their institutional sites, and thus can offer insights into the resources available to faculty across the institution. All disability support staff were invited to participate as there are two resource counselors and two support staff members at the largest campus and only one on the two smaller campuses. In addition, the autism education specialist, who is a staff member in disability support for the college, was specifically invited to participate because this person could provide information about the resources available to faculty for supporting students with ASD

and how often faculty take advantage of them. The directors for the education sites were chosen since there are no dedicated disability support supervisors at these locations. Instead, they rely on counselors from the main campus to support them. Thus, the directors are a primary point of contact for faculty who are assisting students with disabilities and can thus provide insight into how faculty are supported on their sites. The director of the online program was chosen because this position supervises technical and support services for faculty which impact faculty's ability to support students with ASD in an online environment. These participants were all included because they represent the perspective of institutional support systems with which the GWL framework calls for coordinated communication in order to support students with disabilities.

The largest group of participants were full-time general education instructors from each of the college's three campuses and education centers, including faculty who teach at least part of their course load online. According to the college's employee handbook, faculty for the college are defined as full-time instructors who have additional duties as assigned, including committee participation and student advising. The terms faculty and instructors will be used interchangeably in this study. General education faculty were specifically identified because all students must take basic general education courses, such as college composition or math, to fulfill degree requirements, so these instructors interact with almost all students who come through the college. As a result, general education faculty are more likely to encounter students with ASD on a regular basis. General education faculty are also employed full-time at all of the campuses and education sites, as opposed to technical education faculty, for example, who are not employed on all of the campuses. Thus, focusing on general education faculty as

participants ensured at least one potential faculty member could be interviewed at each campus. Full-time faculty were also chosen because of institutional restrictions on workload for adjunct faculty.

Participant selection of faculty played an important role as instructors had to have had experience teaching students with ASD. Both purposive sampling and snowball sampling were necessary in order to gain “information-rich data” from faculty who have had this particular experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). The disability support directors for each campus were asked to identify instructors for the first round of faculty interviews for the campuses, and the center directors identified faculty for the centers. These directors were able to identify faculty who have experience with students with ASD. Faculty identified as potential participants by disability support staff were contacted via email by the researcher (see Appendices A and B). After initial interviews were conducted with faculty, snowball sampling was used to identify further participants to gain insight into specific experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of general education faculty who interact with students with ASD. The first round of faculty interviewed were asked to identify other general education faculty within the institution whom they thought would have experiences with students with ASD. Faculty often share experiences with each other and ask colleagues for advice when they encounter challenges in the classroom. Thus, they are likely to know other colleagues they believe have assisted students with ASD in the classroom with unique experiences. Mumbardó-Adam et al. (2020) reinforce this idea. They found that practitioners identified sharing experiences with other professionals as an important form of support in promoting SD skill development for adults with disabilities.

Using this sampling method, it was possible to determine when saturation was reached because additional participants no longer revealed new insights (Creswell, 2014). Ultimately, the study included interviews with 23 faculty members (three from education sites, four from extended campuses, and sixteen from the main campus), four disability support counselors (including two disability support supervisors for extended campuses plus the autism education specialist), two education site directors, and the online program director. In addition to helping with saturation of information, snowball sampling also assisted with triangulation of data, since multiple experiences allowed for verification of viewpoints and experiences (Shenton, 2004).

### **Data Collection Tools**

Data collection took place through semi-structured interviews with faculty and disability support staff. Prior to beginning the data collection process, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from both the University of Missouri and the institution under investigation. IRB approval ensured ethical treatment of participants as well as privacy for students on whom faculty and staff were reflecting (Creswell, 2016). As data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, in accordance with Centers for Disease Control (CDC; 2020) recommendations, data collection was conducted remotely to maintain social distancing. Participants were asked to conduct the interview via Zoom Video Communications. Video conferencing was preferred because it allowed for rapport building; plus, video conferencing provided visual cues from participants which could not be achieved via emailed interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

All participant names remained confidential, and because all interviews were recorded, video/audio files and interview transcripts were stored on a Google Drive account that is password protected. Before interviews were conducted, the researcher verbally read the Informed Consent Script (see Appendix C) for participants and emphasized that, while names would remain anonymous, interview content would be shared with a wider audience (Seidman, 2013). Reviewing consent allowed participants to make an informed decision about what information they were comfortable sharing (Creswell, 2014). The participant was also reminded that the interview was being recorded in order to assist with transcription.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection tool because they allow researchers to gather detailed information about participants' perceptions and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Seidman (2013) explained that when participants are interviewed, they must probe their consciousness and select details from their experiences to answer questions. In this way, people are able to construct meaning from their experiences. This sort of interview process served different purposes for faculty and staff participants. First, the interviews with support staff and directors were designed to reveal what they recommend faculty do when interacting with students to develop the students' SD skills as well as the institutional supports they know are available to faculty. The second reason was because support staff and administrators' responses could be used to triangulate data as well as reveal comparisons and contrasts in perceptions of communication across the participant groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, if support staff stated certain supports were in place for faculty but faculty were not aware of these supports, this would reveal a gap in communication across the institution.

Semi-structured interviews were also useful for faculty participants. This interview style allowed instructors to probe their experiences regarding how they interact with students with ASD to develop SD skills. SD is a relatively new concept, and not all faculty were familiar with the conversation about it or the strategies for fostering SD. Depending on how long faculty had taught and how many experiences they had with students with ASD, faculty sometimes did not consciously realize what strategies they used to help these students. Most were familiar with processes for helping students set goals or helping students learn to communicate their needs, for example, which are common SD behaviors. Thus, faculty sometimes were fostering SD skills or behaviors without knowing the terminology. Semi-structured interviews allowed for adaptation of the questioning process to probe faculty's experiences (Seidman, 2013). To facilitate this sort of reflection yet ensure that some standardized information was obtained, an interview protocol was used, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) (see Appendices D and E). The GWL framework also guided the protocol for all groups, focusing not just on the way faculty interact with students to develop and reinforce crucial SD skills but also on how the sample participant groups communicate with each other as well as their awareness and access of institutional supports as needed.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis of all interviews was conducted using the constant comparative method to develop emerging themes from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as supported by the GWL framework. As recommended by Seidman (2013), the researcher transcribed all interviews verbatim in order to become highly familiar with the information, noting any nonverbal signals as well in brackets within the transcript.



Seidman (2013) posited that including nonverbal cues as well as deciding where to punctuate statements in interviews can be a form of beginning analysis; thus, transcription was an important part of the analysis process. Data were coded simultaneously with data collection in order to facilitate the development of codes, manage the body of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and find a focus to the data as it developed (Suddaby, 2006).

Formal analysis began with line-by-line open coding where segments of data which address the research questions were identified (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), specifically looking for categories of information (Creswell, 2014) which aligned with the GWL framework's recommendations regarding the facilitation of SD skills, communication across stakeholder groups, and access of institutional supports. This process required inductively linking key words used by faculty, staff, and directors which aligned with current research into SD as well as forms of communication between faculty and support staff. These initial segments were reduced down to categories through axial coding, where connections between initial comments were linked together (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process was repeated for each transcript.

Once all transcripts were coded, a memo of emerging themes was written (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), tracking patterns specifically regarding how faculty interact with students with ASD in developing SD skills. The memo also documented emerging themes regarding communication between faculty and staff to support students as well as awareness of institutional supports. These themes were triangulated with codes which emerged from analysis of interviews with support staff and directors in order to reveal inconsistencies or corroborate perspectives (Shenton, 2004). The GWL (2009) transition

framework was used as the lens to analyze codes at this point. These codes revealed whether strategies faculty are using align with the recommendations of the current scholarship. The memo used “thick, rich description,” specifically regarding interactions with students and resources used, which, when incorporated into the findings, allow readers to determine if the findings are transferable to their own experiences in the classroom (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2010).

### **Researcher Positionality**

Creswell (2014) stated that researchers must identify their potential biases and personal background which may shape their interpretations of data in a qualitative study. Thus, it is important to note that the researcher has been a general education faculty member of the institution under investigation for thirteen years. This role had the potential to impact the researcher’s data collection and analysis in a few ways, such as informing the researcher’s knowledge of disability support resources available to faculty or affecting participants’ choice of responses during the interviews. As a result, the interview protocols were designed to reduce the effects on collection. Questions were designed to allow open-ended responses which would give faculty choices about how to respond and prevent the researcher from asking leading questions. Prior relationships were also important to consider before data collection. Seidman (2013) cautioned that researchers must be careful not to let relationships with participants affect the interview, such as not asking following up questions or distorting responses because of prior knowledge of the participant’s experiences. Asking disability support staff to recommend the first round of participants reduced potential bias from the researcher choosing

participants and increased the odds of the researcher interviewing people she had not encountered previously.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study has significance for the development of faculty professional development as well as potential policy changes for the institution. The first research question seeks to determine how faculty promote the development of SD skills for students with ASD. As a result, the study has the potential to contribute to the continuing conversation about how SD skills can be developed in adults and more specifically for adult students with ASD. As Garrison-Wade and Lehmann (2009) observed, identifying best practices for helping students with disabilities has the potential to help all students. Many students, not just those with ASD, struggle with SD skills such as understanding their strengths and setting goals; as a result, identifying how faculty promote SD for students with ASD has the potential to shed light on practices that can be used for all students (McKeon et al., 2013). McKeon et al.'s (2013) study reinforced the need for training that focuses on helping faculty learn improved strategies for teaching organization, time management, and other EF skills in the classroom.

The second and third research questions focus on the nature of ongoing communication between faculty and staff and awareness of disability support access and accommodations for students. These research questions have implications for disability support services specifically. Interviews with faculty revealed the nature of communication between faculty and staff. In addition, the study highlighted faculty's awareness of institutional supports available to help them and how often they take advantage of these resources. Faculty interviews reinforced the effectiveness of these

supports as well as the need for more resources to increase faculty's awareness of accommodations and access for students with disabilities. Knowing faculty's perceptions of the supports offered their use of them has the potential to help disability support staff reevaluate the services offered or perhaps the advertising for their services. In addition, understanding how faculty help students with ASD develop SD skills can inform disability support offices about topics that should be covered in professional development sessions.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

#### **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**

The ADA is a federal law first passed in 1990 and reauthorized with amendments in 2008 which provides protections for postsecondary students with disabilities (LeGary, 2017). It provides access to accommodations such as modifications to physical environments on campus or support services which facilitate classroom learning and test taking (LeGary, 2017).

#### **Disability Support (DS) Services/Office**

According to Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD; n.d.) disability support is a postsecondary campus service which consults and collaborates with students with disabilities to provide reasonable accommodations for college coursework. In addition, AHEAD's (n.d.) program standards indicate that this office should also disseminate information to campus stakeholders, including students, faculty, staff, and administration in order to promote accessibility; promote faculty and staff awareness and professional development; and help students with disabilities develop independence through SD.

## **Campus**

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC), which is the accrediting body for the institution in this study, defines campuses as a permanent location for an institution which offers educational programs to earn a degree, has its own faculty and supervising administration, and has its own independent authority for budget and hiring.

## **Education Center**

HLC defines education centers as a permanent location independent of a postsecondary institution's main campus. These additional locations offer courses towards degree programs but do not have a full range of administrative and student services on site. Instead, these services may be facilitated from a main campus. Education centers will also be referred to in the study as education sites or simply sites.

## **Executive Function (EF)**

EF is the neurocognitive processes which control goal-setting and management of those goals, such as storage and recall of information, emotional control, and problem-solving behaviors (Cumming et al., 2019; Richman et al., 2014).

## **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**

IDEA is a federal law first passed in 1975 which provides funding for free services for children in public education and regulates these services (IDEA, n.d.). These services are provided from early childhood through graduation from a secondary school up to the age of 21 (IDEA, n.d.). Once students with disabilities either graduate from secondary school or reach age 21, they no longer receive services under IDEA (LeGary, 2017).

## **Faculty**

Faculty are defined as full-time members of MCC's staff whose primary job duties include planning, facilitating, and managing 15 hours of classroom instruction and maintaining at least five office hours per week. Faculty also have additional duties include advising assigned students, completing 20 hours of professional development per year, participating on committee work, and other duties as assigned. Faculty may also be referred to as instructors throughout the study.

### **Self-Determination (SD)**

SD may be actions or behaviors which allow one to act as a "primary causal agent" (White et al., 2018, p. 737), meaning someone who is able to autonomously take actions using self-regulated behaviors and with awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses in order to accomplish established goals (Kim, 2019). SD skills for students with disabilities may include awareness of one's disability, ability to describe one's disability to support providers, or having self-regulation of emotions to persist despite challenges (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). SD is distinct from EF because EF identifies the neurocognitive processes involved in doing certain self-directed actions, while SD is related to self esteem and the ability determine which EF behaviors are needed to accomplish a goal (Richman et al., 2014).

### **Summary**

As students with ASD continue to enroll in college in greater numbers, researchers must continue to understand the challenges these students face in higher education settings. These challenges are creating barriers which prevent these students from persisting and graduating from college. Garrison-Wade and Lehmann (2009) argued that colleges must create environments where students can use SD skills, including

creating better student engagement opportunities so students can communicate with faculty and staff. In addition, faculty must support self-determination development through their work with students in the classroom, whether in a physical classroom or online. Faculty and staff must also participate in ongoing communication to increase awareness of access and accommodations for students.

SD skills play an important role in student success, and faculty can support skill development for students with ASD. This study seeks to add to the knowledge of how to do foster SD skills by identifying methods faculty employ to help students learn skills such as autonomy, goal setting, and choice-making, among other SD behaviors. In-depth interviews with general education faculty will give insight into methods faculty are using, how they think these methods are working, and why they have chosen certain methods over others. Furthermore, this study will also highlight the role of communication between faculty and staff in supporting students with ASD and their experiences of access and accommodations for disability support. This knowledge will contribute to the conversation by specifying methods practitioners can employ as well as inform what institutional supports are helping them accomplish this within higher education institutions.

SECTION TWO:  
PRACTITIONER SETTING FOR THE STUDY



Midwest Community College (MCC) is a two-year community college serving 16 school districts. The college has three academic divisions, including a general education, technical, and Allied Health division, and according to the college web site, has a student population of approximately 12,000. According to the college web site, the average student to faculty ratio is 17:1, and the average student age is 20. The college has three campuses, two education centers, a workforce development center, and an online “campus.” The college serves primarily as a transfer institution, with many students matriculating to one of three local four-year universities or other institutions. For this study, all three campuses, the two education centers, and the online program within the system will be included in the research.

### **History of Organization**

MCC is a regionally-accredited community college located in an urban Midwestern city. The college has been in operation for almost 30 years, and its mission is to provide accessible and low-cost education opportunities for the districts it serves. The college has grown quickly. Within 30 years, the school’s peak enrollment grew to approximately 13,000 enrolled students. As the college outgrew its building space, it looked to online learning and outlying towns where it could open education centers. An online education program was developed and is referred to as an “online campus.” Centers were also opened in four towns, one as close as 25 miles from the main campus, and one as far as 83 miles away. From 1996 to 2008, each center was opened to both serve the education needs of the local community as well as redirect the flow of students from the maxed-out classrooms on the main campus.

In 2011, to compensate for funding inequities and lack of representation within the state's community college association, the college transitioned from a main campus with separate education centers to a college system. As a result, the main campus president shifted to the role of chancellor, and the two largest education centers were recognized as individual campuses. Each of the new campuses now has its own acting campus president (the chancellor also serves as the original campus' president), and each campus is referred to by a name symbolic to the local communities they serve. The remaining two education centers plus the online program are run by directors rather than campus presidents.

According to the Higher Learning Commission, the accrediting body for MCC, a campus is defined as a permanent location offering classes which lead to a degree or certificate which has its own administration, faculty, staff, and budget authority (Higher Learning Commission, 2019). By contrast, a center is defined as an "additional location" by the Higher Learning Commission, and these locations offer 50% or more of courses required to complete a degree or certificate yet does not have full administrative or student services on site (Higher Learning Commission, 2019). MCC's campuses adhere to these guidelines, providing administrative and student services staff at each campus, including disability support. The centers, however, rely on the North Campus, previously known as the main campus, to provide student services resources for them, including disability support. This study will focus on all campuses and centers despite the difference in service support. The rationale is because faculty at centers may offer a different perspective on how they access resources to help them support students with ASD in the classroom.

## **North Campus**

North Campus was the original campus site. When the college first began operations in the early 1990s, it operated out of two buildings, one a former vocational-technical center and the other a former high school. The campus received accreditation from HLC a few years after opening and has since grown into eight buildings which house classroom and office space, and includes a daycare, an exercise center, health services, and other services for employees and qualifying students.

According to the college's website, the North Campus currently has approximately 7,000 enrolled students with an average age of 20. These students are from the surrounding metropolitan area as well as rural communities from the northern side of the city. The primary employment for the area is healthcare, education, and manufacturing; therefore, there is a strong need for college graduates and workforce training in the community.

## **Midway Campus**

Midway Campus opened 12 years ago and offers general education classes as well as two Allied Health degree programs and the college's Agriculture department. The campus has approximately 1,000 enrolled students. The campus is comprised of three buildings, one of which is multilevel and contains the primary classrooms and faculty, staff, and administrative offices. The other two buildings are single level; one houses classrooms but no offices, and the other is used as classroom and work space for the Agriculture department.

According to a local news site, 75% of the college's students are drawn from suburban cities which are approximately 25 miles from the metropolitan community that

the North Campus serves. Other students are drawn from rural communities south of the metropolitan area. These communities are located in a different county from the North Campus, and thus have different local demographics. For example, the primary occupation for this county is sales followed closely by construction. Therefore, more general education and workforce training are needed to support local industry.

### **Southern Campus**

Opened only six years ago, Southern Campus is the newest of the three branches. The campus primarily offers general education courses for transfer degree completion as well as technical and adult education courses. In addition, two Allied Health programs and two technical education programs can be completed at the campus. The campus is comprised of one three-level building, though most of the classroom and office space is housed on the first two levels with intentions of expanding into the third level as enrollment increases.

Current student enrollment is approximately 400 students. This campus serves yet a third county and is located in a mid-size town whose primary industry is entertainment and healthcare. Similarly to Midway Campus, Southern Campus also draws students from surrounding rural communities.

### **Education Centers**

#### ***Eastern Education Center***

Eastern Education Center was the second location the college opened, only five years after the North Campus began operations. The center is currently housed in two single-story facilities and serves over 350 students. In addition to offering general education classes for transfer students and classes for technical education programs, the

center has partnered with a local four-year university to offer education classes which earns students a bachelor's degree in education from the university.

The center has limited student services available, including testing services and admissions. Additional services are delivered remotely, such as with online tutoring. Disability support for this center is also conducted remotely through disability support counselors from the North Campus. This center serves a fourth county in the service district, and its primary employment is manufacturing, which means workforce development is in high demand.

### ***Northeastern Education Center***

Northeastern Education Center is the farthest location from the central North Campus, at a distance of almost 8 miles. This site is located in one one-story building, consisting of 9 classrooms and 4 computer labs. The center offers general education courses primarily and serves fewer than 350 students. Similar to the Eastern Education Center, Northeastern's disability support is served by the North Campus's counselors.

Northeastern serves the fifth county in the district, and located in this county is a military base. Therefore, the area's top employer is the government.

### **Online Program**

The college's online program makes up almost a quarter of the college's enrollment, according to fact sheets for the institution. Furthermore, approximately 5,000 students have enrolled in at least one online class during the last academic year. The online program does not have dedicated faculty as the other campuses and sites do. Instead, it draws from existing full-time and adjunct faculty across the institution, requiring department chairs in each division to staff online classes. Before being allowed

to teach online, faculty are encouraged to participate in training which prepares them to use the institution's learning management system.

The online program does have its own dedicated support staff, including a director who has been in the position for almost two years, three e-learning and instructional design specialists, and at least one part-time administrative staff person. These staff members assist not only faculty with instructional design of online classes but also students who may need help with technical problems related to online learning.

### **Organizational Analysis**

Currently, MCC and its extended campuses and educational sites are set up as one hierarchical organization. The system uses a very traditional model of top-down leadership management. The chancellor sets initiatives; then, vice chancellors, followed by campus presidents, then campus deans and college directors are expected to implement mandates across all campuses and educational sites. In essence, the expectation is that the school will function like a machine bureaucracy (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Even courses in some departments are tightly controlled, such as math where instructors must get written permission from the department chair to change a single lesson's content or change the order of lessons.

Bolman and Deal (2013) describe traditional college settings as professional bureaucracies. In their example of Harvard, faculty are insulated from administrators through factors like tenure and the belief that faculty are highly trained professionals who can be trusted to operate independently. However, these factors do not exist at MCC. Instead, direct orders are given to faculty who are then monitored for compliance,

resulting in a tight coupling across the campuses (Weick, 1978). When mandates are made, all campuses must follow the directive.

As a result of transitioning to a college system, policies are sometimes mandated that do not fit with another campus' or education center's culture. Local communities have different planning needs or expectations that local administrators and faculty are more likely to be aware of, such as the preference for night classes or the need for more scheduling in the morning to accommodate dual enrolled high schoolers. For example, the newest campuses, which were former education centers, serve unique populations, many of them rural or economically struggling. Students in these communities have very different needs from students on the main campus which is located in a suburban environment. Faculty, administrators, and staff at the extended campuses have a better understanding of how policies can affect their students and curriculum that best serves their needs. When new initiatives are planned, if faculty members on all campuses are not able to participate adequately in the discussion to shape the outcomes or give voice to their campus's needs, problems can arise.

As a result, at the extended campus and center level, it is easy to see Hegelson's web of inclusion at work, which Bolman and Deal (2013) describe as a more circular structure, with loose connections from one area of the campus or center to the next. Despite the tight coupling that is attempted, the loose connections are made possible by the smaller campus sizes and building design which encourages more spontaneous discussion when faculty, staff, and administrators encounter each other throughout the day (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Instructors and support staff are able to interact regularly due to their close proximity to each other, as contrasted with the North Campus.

Often, the deans of students for the extended campuses and directors of the education sites are easily accessible too due to their smaller building sizes. Accessibility creates the sense that deans and directors are equals rather than hierarchical supervisors. Deans and center directors frequently give instructors and staff leeway in how they run their classrooms and departments. Doing so negates the need for faculty and staff to delay decision making, as may happen on the North Campus. Faculty at extended campuses and centers can express concerns directly to their deans; likewise, administrators can communicate directly with their faculty rather than through layers of supervisors, and while there may not be total agreement, often with smaller operating cores at these campuses, a consensus can at least be established, which can lead to reinforcement of group cohesion (Levi, 2017).

The organically developed cultures of these extended campuses and education centers leads to a problem with the attempted tightly coupled structure of MCC overall. Despite attempts to keep a tight structure, the campuses are functioning as loosely coupled with the main campus and maintain their own unique webs of inclusion (Weick, 1978; Bolman & Deal, 2013). The problem is that while institutional mandates, such as mandated attendance taking, are monitored closely, departments often do not have the same capabilities due to the nature of their policies. Without direct supervision, extended campus instructors can either choose to maintain the policies or not, particularly policies with no required reporting of results. Sometimes, campus deans even work to adjust the policies or curriculum, finding ways to make them more manageable for their campuses and students.



## **Disability Support Office Structure**

The organizational structure affects the work of the disability support (DS) offices at each campus as well. On North Campus, the DS office is a standalone service with its own dedicated office space. It is staffed by three full-time resource counselors and three disability specialists (i.e. a deaf education specialist), two support staff, and one receptionist. The North Campus DS office is also responsible for maintaining the institutional disability support web page. The page offers general resources for faculty on Title IX, testing accommodations for students with disabilities, online accessibility, and other frequently asked questions. The page is intended as one form of support for faculty who need assistance in helping students with disabilities. Furthermore, the North Campus DS office employs an autism education specialist who is another form of institutional support available to faculty teaching students with ASD. When students with ASD register with the DS office, the autism education specialist sends an email to faculty teaching the student. While the email does not identify the student by name, in accordance with privacy regulations, the email does alert the faculty that he or she may have a student with ASD and provides examples of behavior to be alert for and ways to accommodate the student or manage disruptive behaviors. This email is sent to any faculty regardless of which campus or site the student is attending.

By contrast, Midway Campus combines its DS office in the Academic Support Center (ASC) with library, testing, and tutoring services for the campus. One director is responsible for supervising all of these departments, some of which are located in different physical locations on the campus. The ASC has five full-time staff members, including a director of library services and administrative assistant. On this campus, the

DS services are facilitated by one disability support specialist who is assisted by the administrative assistant as well as the director of the ASC, even though disability support is not part of their primary duties.

South Campus has the smallest support office of the three campuses. It is part of the Academic Services division on this campus, which also houses library, testing, tutoring services. One director is responsible for all of the services along with two part-time staff members.

The tension of loose versus tight coupling is also evident through the operations of the DS services for each campus. Structurally, North Campus is responsible for professional development for all campuses because Academic Affairs, which coordinates professional development for the college, is housed on this campus. However, few sessions are offered at the outlying campuses. To illustrate, Midway Campus offered approximately seven professional development opportunities during the most recent school year, of which only one was related to disability support training. This lack of professional development impedes the opportunity for MCC to develop as a learning organization because it is not able to share conversation and dialogue across the institution, thus losing the opportunity to develop shared meaning (Crossan et al., 1999). In turn, there is difficulty institutionalizing shared knowledge by creating policies that represent all campuses and centers (Crossan et al., 1999).

Instead, the extended campuses and education centers rely on informal learning communities to supplement awareness and knowledge of disability support. Since these campuses have their own unique histories and cultures which are distinct and because physical structure encourages inter-departmental communication, faculty, staff, and

administrators have developed these informal communities (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). They share perspectives which inform each others' practices (Merriam & Bierema, 2014).

### **Leadership Analysis**

MCC is led by a chancellor who has been with the institution for over a decade. He also serves as president of North Campus since the restructuring of the college as a system. He employs a "production orientation" mindset, focusing on setting tasks which will maximize efficiency of the college (Northouse, 2016) and maximizing scarce resources through political negotiations (Bolman & Deal, 2013) with the state community college association and the state government.

The chancellor has limited interaction with students and faculty, though. Supporting him in this capacity are the Provost of Student Affairs and the Provost of Academic Affairs. The Provost for Student Affairs supervises the DS office for North Campus, while the Provost for Academic Affairs represents faculty's interests, thus their leadership styles are of equal interest for the purposes of this study. Both the Provost of Student Affairs and the Provost of Academic Affairs employ more relational behaviors (Northouse, 2016), which contrast with the chancellor's production behaviors. Their support is more nurturing, and the Provost of Academic Affairs in particular often seeks feedback (Northouse, 2016) from faculty to improve the support Academic Affairs provides them.

The current director of the DS office on North Campus leads two resource counselors, two support staff members, one autism education specialist, one deaf education specialist, one assistive technology specialist, and one receptionist. The two

resource counselors are responsible for the intake process for students requesting and accommodations, while the support staff assist with requests for support services. The two specialists work with faculty to help the assist students with special needs as well as students to help them make use of available resources and help them self-advocate. The low number of staff in the office means the office has been primarily task-oriented (Northouse, 2016) rather than outwardly focused on opportunities such as professional development for faculty. While the staff do support faculty, faculty must proactively seek out assistance from them.

Midway Campus is led by a president who has been in this position for almost a decade. He is the only president to have served this campus. His role is mostly to support the chancellor's initiatives by serving as a representative of the college with the state community college association and the state government. He also plays a relational leadership role (Northouse, 2016) for his campus, often visiting faculty offices and greetings students in the hallways between class sessions. Primary operations of the campus are the responsibility of a dean who is responsible for the combined student and academic affairs for the campus. The current dean is the third person in this role since the college opened. He has served at this campus previously as a faculty member, so he is familiar with the campus culture and local community. He employs a leadership model which emphasizes certain behaviors in response to followers' needs (Northouse, 2016), spending more time with faculty who need task setting behaviors and less time with faculty who are able to work independently.

The dean also supervises the director of the Academic Services department, which houses DS services for Midway Campus. The director of Academic Services also adapts

behaviors depending on followers' needs (Northouse, 2016), which is needed since she supervises three different services for the campus, one of which employs only student workers who may need more task-driven supervision. The director also frequently supports the disability resource specialist for the campus, fulfilling some of the duties that a support staff member would fulfill at North Campus's DS office.

South Campus has similar leadership to Midway Campus, though the leadership styles are different. The campus is led by a president whose primary duties are to support the chancellor for the college by advocating for resources (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The president employs a relational leadership style as well (Northouse, 2016), visiting with faculty and appearing in social settings. Academic operations are overseen by a dean of student and academic affairs who employs five administrative staff members and thirteen full-time faculty.

Both of the education centers have a substantially different leadership model from the campuses, which reflects their structural differences as well. Both Eastern Education Center and Northeastern Education Center are led by an executive dean of the centers who coordinates their activities from the Eastern Education Center. He works with the Academic Affairs office located on the North Campus. In addition to coordinating activities for both education centers, he also supervises both faculty and staff at the Eastern Education Center, effectively serving as the director for the site. He has been in this role for approximately 10 years. The Northeastern Center is being led by a relatively newer director who took the position less than a year ago. Her role is to supervise both faculty and staff for the center and serve as a liaison with the dean of the centers. Likewise, the director of the online program is also relatively new, taking on the position

less than two years ago. While she does not directly supervise any faculty, her position requires her to work closely with faculty to provide services which allow them to translate their course content to an online environment.

The leadership models across the campus reflect the loose coupling (Weick, 1978/1983) of the institution and both the challenges and benefits of this structure. Each campus president serves under the chancellor for the institution, yet the campuses are independently functioning from the North Campus, which is the former main campus. Likewise, the directors of the education centers and online program are subsumed under Academic Affairs, reflecting their dependence on the North Campus for student services resources. Yet the centers' distance from the North Campus means they have developed very different cultures reflecting their local communities, and the online program must support faculty from across all five campuses and sites. Thus, the leadership for the extended campuses as well as the education centers and online program must adapt to local stakeholders' demand while maintaining the mandates of the institution. Weick (1978/1983) wrote that the benefit of loose coupling is that leaders have greater self-determination; plus, the system the leaders serve in may develop unique solutions to challenges. This study may thus reveal, in part, how the loose coupling of this institution affects the way faculty access resources and develop strategies for assisting students with ASD.

### **Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting**

This study has direct implications for the practitioner setting. The purpose is three-fold: 1) to analyze the experiences of faculty which inform how they support students with ASD in developing SD skills and 2) to determine how faculty and staff

communicate in pursuit of this goal, and 3) their experiences regarding access and accommodations in supporting students with disabilities. The results have the potential to impact faculty's practices across the organization as well as how support staff communicate and increase awareness of accommodations and accessibility. As seen through this organizational analysis, professional development sessions are difficult to facilitate at the extended campuses and even more so the education centers due to their distance. The study will seek to address the barriers of loose coupling through the development of professional development training and include supplemental materials which may help faculty with their practice. Thus, the study may address the institutional learning challenges which the campuses and centers face.

### **Summary**

Midwest Community College is a relatively young organization adapting to rapid growth in a short span of time. Thus, while its policies and organizational structure reflect a tightly coupled system (Weick, 1978/1983) which is carried over from its days as a one-campus organization, the expansion of extended campuses and remote education centers has created loose coupling (Weick, 1978/1983). Loose coupling allows leaders to respond to unique community demands, while faculty have more autonomy to enact policies responsive to their students' needs (Weick, 1978/1983).

However, loose coupling also creates a challenge for institutional learning and growth. Campuses and centers are all isolated from each other, particularly without as much cross-institutional professional development offered at remote locations. The result is informal learning communities which have sprung up organically at each campus and

institution. While these learning communities help faculty at their immediate site, they do not help the institution develop overall.

The study has implications for addressing this problem. By collecting responses from faculty across the institution, the results will reveal the ways faculty have developed their practice to help students with ASD develop self-determination, how faculty communicate with staff to access disability support, and as a result, what their experiences regarding access and accommodations for students with ASD. These results can be shared across the campus, thus coming full circle in the study's purpose by becoming a resource in itself.



SECTION THREE:  
SCHOLARLY REVIEW FOR THE STUDY

Despite the growing rate of students with ASD who are transitioning from high school to college, there is limited research into these students' experiences in postsecondary institutions. The research regarding students with ASD has been conducted mostly in elementary and secondary settings (Glennon, 2016). Within the last two decades, emerging research has shifted to students with ASD in postsecondary institutions yet has primarily focused on identifying the needs and challenges they face (Jackson et al., 2018; White et al., 2016) and their support systems (Anderson & Butt, 2017). However, there is a gap in the research regarding faculty support in the classroom for students with ASD. Faculty are a primary point of contact for students with ASD within the institution and play a crucial role in facilitating student learning. Their relationship with students will be crucial to understand because of the high rates of departure from college for students with ASD (LeGary, 2017).

This scholarly review will establish a purpose for studying the role faculty play in the postsecondary experiences of students with ASD. The review will first explore the history of laws impacting students with disabilities in postsecondary education and then review current research in the field highlighting the challenges faced by students with ASD in postsecondary institutions as well as the importance of SD for postsecondary transitions. The challenges faced by students will be contrasted with investigations into perceptions of faculty and staff who serve these students. These dovetailing strands of research will contribute to a foundation of knowledge about how faculty can better facilitate the development of self-determination for students with ASD.

## **Federal Law and Disability Support**

Students with ASD are beginning postsecondary education at more frequent rates in the last two decades (Glennon, 2016; LeGary, 2017), and changes in United States legislation have had significant influence on their expanded enrollment. IDEA authorized appropriate services and accommodations for children and young adults enrolled in public school programs (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The act also mandated that schools provide transition planning for students before high school graduation, whether transitioning into postsecondary education or workforce; as a result, IDEA improved access to college for students with disabilities, including those with ASD (Glennon, 2016).

Once students with disabilities leave the K-12 system, they are no longer covered by IDEA. Postsecondary institutions instead are governed by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (LeGary, 2017). Whereas IDEA provides streamlined services and support staff who advocate on behalf of students, once students enter a postsecondary institution, they must self-advocate to receive ADA supports and provide documentation of need (White et al., 2017). After students have documented their needs with the institution, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 mandates that institutions must provide reasonable accommodations for these students (LeGary, 2017). Reasonable accommodations can be defined as “equal access to education provided the accommodations do not alter the essential elements of the academic programs” (Cullen, 2015, p. 90). Thus, accommodations are at the discretion of each college’s disability support office and often focus only on academics, excluding social support which may be crucial for students with ASD in particular (Cullen, 2015). This is why Van Hees et al.

(2015) noted that many colleges and universities are struggling to support students with ASD, because implementing social support requires resources beyond academic support. The lack of social support is also seen by some experts (Cullen, 2015; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014) as a potential reason why despite increased access and resulting enrollment rates, students with ASD are not graduating from postsecondary institutions at proportionate rates (Matthews et al., 2015; Newman et al., 2011). Gobbo & Shmulsky (2014) furthered this claim by including institutional and public policies as well as educational methods in potential causes for the problem.

Understanding the potential causes for the gap in graduation rates is critical because individuals with ASD benefit from college degrees (Drake, 2014). Ashbaugh, et al. (2017) argued that college is a potential solution for adults with ASD who have reported a desire for more social interaction and community inclusion. Furthermore, Cai and Richdale (2015) noted that completing higher education or vocational training is the first step in involving individuals with ASD in the community and helping them find employment. Yet current rates of employment for young adults with ASD are low compared to other young adults with learning disabilities or speech and language impairments (Shattuck et al., 2012).

### **Autism Spectrum Disorder Defining Characteristics**

To further understand the problems experienced by students with ASD, it is important to develop baseline knowledge of the disorder itself. ASD is explained by the American Psychiatric Association (APA; 2013) in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; *DSM-5*) as a neurodevelopmental disorder typified by deficits in social communication and interpersonal interaction. People with ASD may

have difficulties understanding social rules and customs and, as a result, may struggle with forming and maintaining friendships (Knott & Taylor, 2014). Characteristics also typically include repetitive behaviors or patterns of interests and activities (APA, 2013).

The use of the term “spectrum” indicates there is a range of behaviors and characteristics which vary across individuals; thus, diagnoses are typically individualized (APA, 2013). In fact, the *DSM-4* previously included Asperger’s disorder as a diagnosis for individuals who were considered to have a form of autism that did not include language or intellectual impairments, but as of *DSM-5*, this diagnosis was removed and the autism diagnosis altered to include these individuals (APA, 2013). Additional traits associated with autism include challenges with executive function, which is used to develop audience awareness and abstract thinking (Cai & Richdale, 2015; Cox et al., 2017; McKeon et al., 2013) and also works alongside self-determination in order to support goal attainment (Sayman, 2015). Individuals with autism also frequently have co-occurring diagnoses such as anxiety disorder or depression (APA, 2013; Cox et al., 2017), further complicating the identification of appropriate academic supports.

There is ongoing discussion regarding the preferred language when discussing ASD. Social justice and disability theory experts tend to use person-first language to emphasize the individual rather than the diagnosis, (i.e. students with ASD) (Cox et al., 2017; Johnson, 2018; Sarrett, 2018). Autistic self-advocates and neurodiversity experts prefer to emphasize autism, though (i.e. autistic person), in a movement to recognize identity development involved in becoming self-aware and reclamation of the label (Cox et al, 2017; Sarrett, 2018). The American Psychological Association (2010) style manual has recommended using person-first language; thus, this study will use the language

preferred by the field and will use ASD and autism interchangeably as is common of other studies in the field (Cox et al, 2017).

### **Academic Challenges Before and During College**

Difficulties experienced by students with ASD in college can be primarily divided into three categories: social, daily living, and academic (Van Hees et al., 2015).

Academic concerns are of particular importance to discuss, though, because these are barriers that institutions can remove, much as Tinto (2012) noted in his research on college student retention and success. Before students begin college, they may already be at an academic disadvantage because many students who are transitioning do not know how to navigate the college system (Hendrickson et al., 2017). This gap in awareness is one of the challenges disability support offices encounter. In fact, one longitudinal study found that nearly 50% of students who received special education services during high school believed they no longer had a disability once they graduated (Cai & Richdale, 2015). Newman et al. (2011) noted similar findings specifically for students with ASD as well. Drawing from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), their study reported that 24% of postsecondary students with ASD do not identify as having a disability, which may affect their choice to not receive accommodations from disability support.

Studies have also indicated that students with ASD are less likely to participate in transition planning from high school to college than students with other disabilities (Hendrickson et al., 2017). Low participation rates in planning may be due to lower executive function and self-determination behaviors which are used to set personal goals emphasized in transition planning sessions. Furthermore, Anderson and Butt (2017)

found that parents did not feel like high school or college transition services fully prepared them to assist with the transition. Parents discussed how their students' high GPAs were seen by school counselors as assurance that the students would be able to succeed academically at college. "Regrettably, planning for life post-graduation often seemed to proceed without acknowledging the full extent of a young adult's immaturity, social struggles, or mental health concerns" (Anderson & Butt, 2017, p. 3033). The focus on academic success at the secondary level sheds light on the earlier statistic about students believing they have overcome their disability after high school graduation. Gelbar et al. (2014) reinforced this idea by concluding that while the U.S. K-12 education system assumes students with ASD are prepared due to high academic achievements, their academic marks do not predict success at the postsecondary level.

Once students with ASD have begun their college experience, another academic difficulty colleges face is accommodating the wide range of needs these students may have in the classroom. Cai and Richdale (2015) noted that students' preferences for different types of assessments varied widely. For example, some preferred written evaluations because of difficulties with verbal communication, while others struggled with writing and favored oral assessments (Cai & Richdale, 2015). Since ASD may manifest with different patterns of behavior or impairments, there is not a one-size-fits-all accommodation plan. As a result, faculty may often have to make decisions about how to support students with ASD in the classroom beyond mandated accommodations (Cox et al., 2017; Glennon, 2016). Ashbaugh et al. (2017) supported that need in their observation that most colleges' services do not address the wide range of supports some students may require.

Additionally, Sarrett (2018) argued that most academic accommodations provided to students with disabilities, including those with ASD, are often identified by practitioners without input from the students. Accommodations are frequently based on services provided to students during high school and do not customize plans for college-level coursework (Sarrett, 2018). The concern is that this practice can lead to misalignment with students' needs, particularly for those students who are less likely to understand or feel comfortable with self-advocacy (Sarrett, 2018; Sayman, 2015). In addition, Shepler and Woosley (2012) noted that students may not be aware of how certain services in their secondary education benefited them and how those will translate into a postsecondary environment. Thus, they argued, there is a need for cross-institutional communication between secondary and post-secondary disability professionals. Furthermore, Shepler and Woosley (2012) pointed out that when students are not included in planning conversation about their academic accommodations, they do not learn to self-advocate and do not develop important self-determination skills.

These findings illustrate the need for a comprehensive network to support students with ASD (Ashbaugh et al., 2017). Cox et al. (2017) argued that one of the barriers to supporting students with ASD is the belief that disability support services are primarily responsible for assisting them. Instead, it is crucial to include the voices of students, parents, staff, and faculty in designing supports for students because support services may need to go beyond academics (Glennon, 2016). Communication of this nature echoes Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) findings regarding the need for institutional collaboration and social support in addressing student retention.



## **Self-Determination**

The study of self-determination within higher education is still relatively recent. Broadly speaking, there are two theoretical strands of self-determination: (a) self-determination theory as it informs intrinsic motivation and (b) causal agency theory (Shogren et al., 2020; Wehmeyer et al., 2018). The latter builds on education and psychology fields (Shogren et al., 2020) and is primarily used when discussing transition planning for students with disabilities entering postsecondary institutions (Wehmeyer et al., 2018).

Causal agency theory focuses on individuals using self-determined actions to be causal agents in their lives. Wehmeyer et al. (2018) defined a causal agent as “a person who makes or causes things to happen in their lives” (p. 55) using three essential elements: (a) actions that help initiate the change, (b) beliefs, such as self-awareness, that enable them to act on change, and (c) skills that allow sustained action in order to accomplish a goal. Actions that initiate change may include being able to communicate needs with others and setting long or short-term goals, while beliefs to enable change may require thinking through the steps required to accomplish these goals (Shogren et al., 2020). Skills that allow sustained action may be knowing personal strengths and limitations and being able to activate both actions and beliefs effectively to accomplish these goals (Shogren et al., 2020). Skills may also include self-regulation of emotions, particularly when faced with challenges to goal attainment (Getzel & Thoma, 2008).

These skills have implications both for both academic success and quality of life. First, postsecondary success and retention are impacted by SD. Many studies have noted the connection between enhanced SD skills and greater academic success (Getzel &

Thoma, 2008; Parker & Boutelle, 2009; Richman et al., 2014; Ward & Webster, 2018). Other studies have shown that SD is also connected to lower levels of stress while in school (Richman et al., 2014). Beyond college, SD contributes to improved quality of life, whether from ability to enter and sustain a satisfying career (Kim, 2019), financial independence (Parker & Boutelle, 2009), or forming romantic relationships (Kim, 2019)

Researchers have argued that SD can be developed over time and that interventions can help promote its development (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Mumbardó-Adam et al., 2020; Shogren et al., 2020). Experts have argued that environments should be created which allow students with disabilities to facilitate SD skills and develop competency (Shogren et al., 2020), thus aligning with Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) call for postsecondary settings to allow students to practice SD skills.

Furthermore, these environments should be collaborative in nature, with a person of authority providing freedom of choice rather than directive counsel (Richman et al., 2014).

In current research, though, interventions have primarily focused on secondary students to the point that Jameson (2007) argued that the investigation of SD in postsecondary institutions is not making an impact, resulting in low retention of students with disabilities. Getzel and Thoma (2008) furthered this argument by explaining that SD development is not just the responsibility of secondary schools but also postsecondary. Part of the transition process involves adjusting to and remaining enrolled in college, and Getzel and Thoma (2008) reinforced the need for continued research into what SD skills are most important to students and what interventions can be used to promote SD.

## **Self-Determination and Executive Function**

Self-determination, sometimes also referred to as self-regulation, has often been used interchangeably with EF in discussions of academic success and students with disabilities (Cumming et al., 2019). Yet the two are distinct, even if they are interwoven concepts. EF skills are at the root of many other higher order skills, such as problem solving, and this includes self-determination (Cumming et al., 2019). Whereas SD is the ongoing process of monitoring emotions and actions in correlation with goals and adapting as necessary to achieve goals, EF are the actual skills that can be called upon in order to accomplish these actions and behaviors, such as time management which may be used to complete a project on time (Cumming et al., 2019). SD impacts these abilities, including through sense of self-esteem, self-awareness, and ability to critically reflect (Richman et al., 2014). As a result, the two concepts are tightly interwoven.

EF is believed to develop over time from childhood to adolescence (Cumming et al., 2019). SD, on the other hand, is more adaptive, and experts have argued that SD can be developed through a collaborative process that encourages reflection and independence (Goudreau & Knight, 2018; Richman et al., 2014). However, Grieve et al. (2014) argued that certain aspects of EF can, in fact, continue developing into adulthood. They explained that knowledge of how to self-regulate behaviors and emotions develops further from adolescence into early adulthood, a time when many young adults are beginning postsecondary education. Thus, for the purposes of this study, it is important to understand the interrelatedness of the two functions. Faculty and disability support staff may find themselves needing to support EF behaviors, such as reflecting on past

assignments in order to plan for future ones, to help students activate SD skills for success (Richman et al., 2014).

### **Self-Determination and Students with ASD**

The importance of SD skills for students with disabilities has been relatively established, but research specifically focusing on young adults and students specifically with ASD is still developing. Fullerton and Coyne (1999) explained that individuals with autism may have difficulty with some SD concepts which are more abstract, such as long-term planning. SD also relies on strengths with social and communication cues, which some individuals with ASD may have difficulties with, thus impairing their ability to enact these skills (Chou et al., 2017). To illustrate, Chou et al. (2017) investigated levels of SD among students with ASD, intellectual disability (ID), and learning disability (LD) (Chou et al., 2017). They found that students with ASD had lower levels of autonomy compared to students with ID and LD and lower levels of self-regulation and psychological empowerment than students with LD. As a result, Chou et al. (2017) noted students with ASD have unique learning profiles which may inform design of interventions in fostering SD.

### **Student Perceptions**

Studies have identified the general challenges of supporting students with ASD, and as the field continues to develop, researchers have emphasized the importance of including students' voices in the conversation. Doing so elucidates why the challenges may be occurring. One theme from studies focusing on students' perceptions of their experiences is concern regarding disclosure of their diagnoses. A variety of reasons contribute to their reluctance. First, many students have concerns about stigma that may

be associated with autism (Cai & Richdale, 2015; Cox et al., 2017; Dymond et al., 2017; Van Hees et al., 2015). Another reason was because some felt overly needy for requesting accommodations or did not want to draw attention to themselves (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Hendrickson et al., 2017).

Other studies indicated students with ASD have a misconception about their accommodations at college, sometimes seeing them as cheating (Dymond et al., 2017; Sayman, 2015). Sayman (2015) related the story of a student who did not want to use her accommodations allowing use of a calculator in her math class because both her instructor and her mother told her it was cheating. Thus, despite her accommodations, she did not use one.

Similarly, some students were confused about what their accommodations provided for them. Sayman (2015) related how during one interview, a student recounted asking about using colored paper for note taking in one of her classes, yet her particular diagnosis did not warrant needing colored paper for an accommodation. Many students were not even aware of the range of services available to them at their college (Dymond et al., 2017). These included services beyond simply accommodations, such as socialization assistance provided through disability support offices (Dymond et al., 2017; Hendrickson et al., 2013). Still others wanted to cope with their learning needs without assistance (Cox et al., 2017; Van Hees et al., 2015).

Beyond disclosure concerns, a common theme among students was a sense of loneliness. Despite students finding satisfaction in college because they were able to pursue their interests in depth (Anderson, 2014; Drake, 2014), students reported not being able to make friends or difficulties networking with people with similar interests

(Anderson et al., 2017; Ashbaugh et al., 2017; Van Hees et al., 2015). This theme aligns with the fact that ASD is characterized by problems with social skills (Madriaga et al., 2008).

Madriaga et al. (2008) explained that students perceived faculty as playing a complex part of their experiences with socialization and isolation on college campuses. Some students reported stigmatization from faculty (Cox et al., 2017) while others shared experiences where faculty understood them better once they self-disclosed their autism diagnoses (Van Hees et al., 2015). Some believed that faculty's attitudes and support for them shaped how other students perceived of and treated them (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Garrison-Wade, 2012). Students also reported miscommunications with instructors due to not understanding socio-linguistic cues their instructors gave, and as a result, these had a negative impact on student-instructor relationships (Cai & Richdale, 2015).

Yet faculty were also seen as the most important source of support for academics (LeGary, 2017). LeGary (2017) wrote that students with ASD see faculty as a form of informational support, which is defined as providing information that will be impactful in a person's life and implies a sense of caring about the person's success. In LeGary's (2017) case study of ten students with ASD, eight identified faculty as providing information that reduced college-related stress and enhanced their college success. Taken together, these perceptions by students across multiple studies indicate the importance of faculty building relationships with students with autism in order to assist them with their college success. Faculty may need to be aware of behaviors that indicate ASD in case students have not self-disclosed, faculty may need to help students understand their

accommodations and how to use them, and of course, faculty must facilitate classroom learning in a way that works for students with ASD.

### **Faculty and Staff Perceptions**

Research indicates that faculty and staff perceive different facets of the same challenges students identified. White et al. (2016) explained that faculty perceive students with ASD as less successful at self-advocacy and often will not build crucial connections with their instructors. In Gobbo and Shmulsky's (2014) focus group interviews, faculty noted that students with ASD often violate social norms by missing cues or not being aware of physical boundaries, also contributing to difficulties connecting with students. Yet faculty also acknowledge the importance of building one-on-one relationships with students in order to reduce stress and anxiety for them in the classroom (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014).

Students' fears about accommodations being seen as cheating are also echoed in faculty's perceptions. While faculty do not necessarily see alternative assessments as cheating, they do express concern that allowing some alterations may deprive students of learning skills (Knott & Taylor, 2014; Cox et al., 2017). The most common concern was allowing students to work individually instead of participating in groupwork (Knott and Taylor, 2014) which was seen as a denial of "real world experience."

Faculty have also expressed concerns about helping students develop critical thinking skills since students with ASD struggle with theory of mind (Myers & DeWall, 2017), which may help them be able to see from another's perspective. Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) found that faculty struggled to help students with ASD develop

audience awareness, which made it challenging for students to develop detail in assignments or understand why they needed to provide explanations in their work.

A related issue that faculty must consider when assisting students with ASD is balancing the need to accommodate students appropriately with the need to promote students' independence and self-determination (Dymond et al., 2017). Self-determination affects the ability to make choices, set goals, and problem solve (Sayman, 2015). Sayman (2015) wrote about the importance of self-determination for students with autism because SD helps them function autonomously. While students with ASD may require directed learning which requires instructors to provide clear directions to accomplish tasks, faculty should balance these needs with reinforcement of self-directed behaviors when appropriate (Dymond et al., 2017; Sayman, 2015). Again, this kind of support from faculty may go above and beyond the requirements of disability accommodations and requires an understanding of the individual student's needs which is facilitated through continued communication between instructor and student.

These challenges are complicated by the fact that staff as well as faculty frequently reported feeling underprepared and unsupported in assisting students with autism (Glennon, 2016). In Glennon's (2016) survey of 315 college personnel across the United States, almost half of the respondents revealed that, despite a variety of trainings on ASD, they believed they needed additional information. In addition, two-thirds responded that they struggled to identify appropriate methods for supporting students with ASD. Staff specifically in disability support offices have expressed concerns about their inability to disclose information about students' experiences to parents because it would violate the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act which guards students'



privacy (Dymond et al., 2017). Parents will disclose their child's diagnosis to staff or offer suggestions for potential accommodations, but staff cannot divulge information about the student's performance at the college (Dymond et al., 2017), thus cutting out an important form of instrumental support (LeGary, 2017). Removing parents from the conversation is potentially problematic because researchers consistently reiterate the need for a comprehensive plan to support students (Cox et al., 2017; McKeon et al., 2013) which may involve collaboration between not just faculty and staff but also students and parents or other personal support advocates.

### **Summary**

The literature reveals the barriers students with disabilities are facing during their college experience. Students with ASD are increasingly part of this demographic, and their needs are unique and create challenges for institutions to address (Anderson & Butt, 2017; LeGary, 2017). These challenges are further affected by SD deficits, including emotional regulation (Anderson & Butt, 2017), short-term and long-term planning (Cai & Richdale, 2015; McKeon et al., 2013), and problem solving (Harn et al., 2019), among others.

Likewise, research has revealed the challenges that faculty and staff face when assisting these students upon transitioning to college and entering the classroom. A lack of knowledge about accommodations and appropriate supports coupled with a lack of understanding about ASD itself (Glennon, 2016) indicates a need for further investigation into how to support college faculty and staff. Faculty's knowledge of communication coupled with awareness of access and accommodations is also important because faculty are at the core of Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) transition framework. If faculty

are not able to support students effectively both in the classroom as well as out of the classroom, it is likely retention will continue to be a problem.

Researchers have repeatedly called for more training as well as collaborating across the institution and creating networks of support for students with ASD. These recommendations also align with the GWL (2009) framework regarding the importance of support for students, yet there is little investigation into best practices for accomplishing this. Studies focus on students primarily, which is important since their voices are crucial in identifying their needs. However, to address these needs, researchers must continue investigating the practices faculty use in order to understand the gap between what students perceive they need and what faculty believe they are providing. This study will play a role in filling that gap and help to identify areas where staff and faculty can collaborate to better support students' continued development of SD skills.

SECTION FOUR:  
CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE

## **Practitioner Presentation**

The purpose of this study was to learn what strategies general education faculty use to help students with ASD develop SD skills as well as their communication with disability support staff, and general education faculty and disability support staff's experiences with access and accommodations for students with ASD. The findings have potential implications for helping faculty with their practices; in addition, it may also assist those who work in disability support services. As a result, the findings of the study will be shared with these stakeholders. Once the dissertation study is complete, a presentation accompanied by an executive summary will be provided during a professional development session to report on practices for SD development in students with ASD as well as resources available for learning to promote it.

## Executive Summary

### Statement of the Problem

Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are enrolling in college in record numbers (Shmulsky et al., 2017). Yet reports indicate students with ASD have a postsecondary education completion rate of 40% (Newman et al., 2011), which contrasts with approximately 60% completion rate for neurotypical peers (U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). One hypothesized reason for these low rates is students with ASD may struggle with self-determination (SD) skills (Richman et al., 2014). SD skills include attitudes as well as actions that assist students in setting goals and taking measures to accomplish them. Therefore, to retain and help students with ASD reach graduation, the college should help them develop SD skills.

### Purpose of Study

This study had three objectives:

- identify strategies faculty use to help students develop SD skills,
- determine the nature of communications between faculty and disability support (DS) staff as they assist students with ASD,
- determine the experiences of faculty and DS staff regarding access to DS services and accommodations.

### Selected Literature

Researchers have argued that SD can be developed over time and that interventions can promote its development (Getzel & Thoma, 2008), such as by creating environments which allow students with disabilities to facilitate SD skills (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). These environments should be collaborative in nature, with a person of authority providing freedom of choice rather than directive counsel (Richman et al., 2014).

Faculty should help students develop SD because it can help students better understand the importance of sharing their accommodation letters with faculty. Often students may not do this for a variety of reasons, including

- concerns about stigma associated with autism (Cai & Richdale, 2015; Dymond et al., 2017),
- feeling needy for requesting accommodations or not wanting to draw attention to themselves (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Hendrickson et al., 2017),
- confusion about what their accommodations provided for them (Sayman, 2015) or lack of awareness about services available at their college (Dymond et al., 2017).

### Conceptual Framework

Garrison-Wade and Lehmann (2009) explained three recommendations community colleges can employ to help students with disabilities transition to college:

- developing students' self-determination skills
- ongoing communication between faculty and staff about institutional supports
- improving awareness of access and accommodations for both faculty and students

## Design of Study

This study interviewed 23 general education faculty members, five DS staff, and two site administrators to learn about strategies they use to help students with autism develop SD skills, how faculty and DS staff communicate with each other, and their experience regarding access and accommodations. DS staff who consented to be interviewed made initial recommendations of faculty who could be interviewed about their experiences working with students with autism. After initial interviews were conducted, the first round of participants were asked to identify additional faculty (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) who have also taught students with ASD. Interviews were analyzed in light of Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) recommendations.

## Faculty Recommendations

Interviews with faculty revealed a variety of strategies they use to support students with autism in developing SD skills. The top strategies included communicating proactively, defining expectations while providing choices, building trust, supporting behavior regulation, and increasing confidence in teaching. A common theme faculty expressed was that these strategies are not just good for students with autism; they're good for students of all abilities. Table 1 provides examples of each strategy.

**Table 1**

*Strategies for Faculty to Support Students in Developing SD Skills*

Strategy	Examples
Communicate Proactively with Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• email students when you notice they are struggling with content</li><li>• build time into class to check in with students while they work on an assignment</li></ul>
Define Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• explain expectations for class norms, such as when to raise hand and when not to</li><li>• provide written agendas for class periods</li></ul>
Provide Choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• when possible, provide topic choices for assignments</li><li>• use Universal Design to create lessons</li></ul>
Build Trust with Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• share your own personal stories when appropriate so students know you have faced similar challenges</li><li>• model inclusive behaviors by acknowledging students' with autism contributions to classroom, even when comments may seem off topic</li></ul>

Support Behavior Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• when a student with ASD is unable to self-regulate behavior, such as dominating discussions, communicate with student to find ways to help regulate behaviors, such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ a hand signal to indicate they need to wrap up talking</li> <li>○ tracking number of times they have spoken and agreeing on a limit</li> </ul> </li> <li>• discuss how to translate regulation to other settings, perhaps by identifying a peer to help them</li> </ul>
Increase Confidence in Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop lessons that reinforce or allow discussion of self-determination, as applicable to your discipline</li> </ul>

### Findings and Recommendations for DS Staff

Interviews with both faculty and disability support staff also revealed recommendations for DS staff to support faculty as they work with students with autism. These methods include building rapport with faculty so they feel safe asking for help, communicating in person when possible, being open with faculty about what you can and cannot disclose, helping faculty be creative with accommodations when necessary, reinforcing campus resources available, and offering professional development on teaching strategies and not just identifying signs of ASD. Table 2 provides rationales for each of the recommendations.

**Table 2**

#### *Rationales for DS Staff Recommendations*

Strategy	Rationale
Continue Building Rapport with Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• faculty report feeling inadequate about their knowledge or overwhelmed</li> <li>• as a result, they seek out safe spaces to ask for help</li> <li>• building rapport will help faculty feel like DS is a safe space to ask for help</li> </ul>
Be Open About What You Can and Cannot Disclose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DS counselors indicated the need to support faculty while also respecting student privacy and allowing students autonomy</li> <li>• faculty describe a desire for open conversations about how to help students, yet they also respect privacy</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• being transparent about what you can and cannot disclose may help faculty better understand limitations</li> </ul>
Communicate in Person When Possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• faculty express a desire for openness and transparency in communicating with DS counselors</li> <li>• many instructors reported a preference for communicating in person because they glean more detail from counselors</li> </ul>
Encourage Faculty to Develop Creative Accommodations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• faculty describe the accommodation letter as being a good starting place but not a comprehensive tool for determining how to support students with autism</li> <li>• working with faculty and students to develop accommodations that work best for a particular classroom may help address this</li> </ul>
Reinforce Campus Resources Faculty Can Use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• faculty, DS counselors, and site administrators recommend additional campus resources to help students with autism</li> <li>• advertising resources and how they help with specific classroom skills can help</li> </ul>
Collaborate with Departments to Develop Teaching and Learning Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• faculty differentiate between accommodations and teaching and learning strategies</li> <li>• faculty struggle to help students with autism learn conceptual topics or skills</li> <li>• topics or skills may vary by department, so collaborating with departments will help faculty identify strategies that work for their content</li> </ul>

### Further Research

Further research will continue to help faculty support students with autism. For example, more investigation can help identify specific strategies to help teach conceptual content, such as audience awareness. This study was also limited to only general education, full-time faculty, so further research may be needed to identify recommendations for health and technical education fields.



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**Presentation for Faculty and Staff**

STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING SELF-  
DETERMINATION IN STUDENTS WITH  
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

A study by  
T. Michelle Hudgens

BACKGROUND ON THE STUDY

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

- Federal law governing disability support
  - Mandates reasonable accommodations (LeGary 2017)
  - At discretion of a college's disability support office (Cullen, 2015)

## STATEMENT, CONTINUED

- Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
  - Typified by deficits in social communication and interpersonal interaction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)
  - May struggle with executive function (Cai & Richdale, 2015) and self-determination (Sayman, 2015)
  - May require more social support services not provided by colleges (Cullen, 2015)

STATEMENT, CONTINUED

- Academic Challenges for Students with ASD
  - Less likely to participate in transition planning (Hendrickson et al., 2017)
  - May be confused about what accommodations are available to them (Dymond et al., 2017)
  - May be due to difficulties with self-determination (Chou et al., 2017)

STATEMENT, CONTINUED

- More students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are attending college than in previous decades (LeGary, 2017).
- Reports indicate students with ASD have a postsecondary education completion rate of 40% (Newman et al., 2011)
- College faculty report feeling underprepared to help students with ASD (Glennon, 2016)
- Lack of self-determination skills is often a barrier to SWDs postsecondary success (Richman et al., 2014)

## PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate how community college faculty assist students with ASD in developing SD skills and how faculty access resources, such as disability support services, to accomplish this goal.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (GWL; 2009) conceptual framework for students with disabilities transitioning to college:
  - Importance of developing SD skills
  - Need for ongoing communication across institutions
  - Improved awareness for faculty and staff regarding access and accommodations for students

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) stated that implications of their framework will have positive impacts on all students, not just students with disabilities.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do faculty report fostering self-determination skills for students with ASD?
2. What is the nature of the ongoing communication between faculty and disability support staff in assisting students with ASD?
3. What are the experiences of faculty and disability support staff regarding disability support access and accommodations?

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants in the study included
  - Four disability support counselors
  - Three college directors
  - Twenty-three general education faculty from at least six departments and representing all three campuses and two education sites

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

- Semi-structured interviews via Zoom
- All interviews transcribed verbatim by the researcher
- Interviews coded using recommendations from Merriam and Tisdell (2016)
- GWL framework used to analyze interviews and develop recommendations

## STUDY RESULTS

### RESEARCH QUESTION 1

How do faculty report fostering self-determination skills for students with ASD?

- Communicating proactively
  - 20 out of 23 participants
- Delineating expectations but providing choices
  - 16 out of 23



## RESEARCH QUESTION 1 CONTINUED

- Building trust with students
  - 15 out of 23
- Supporting behavior regulation
  - 15 out of 23
- Increasing confidence in teaching
  - 12 out of 23

## RESEARCH QUESTION 2

What is the nature of the ongoing communication between faculty and disability support staff in assisting students with ASD?

- Faculty Perceptions
  - Safe spaces to ask for help (17 out of 23 participants)
  - Desire for transparency and openness (11 out of 23)
  - Feelings of inadequacy or guilt (10 out of 23)

## RESEARCH QUESTION 2, CONTINUED

- DS Counselors/Site Administrator's Perceptions
  - Rapport with faculty (5 out of 7 participants)
  - Encouraging student autonomy (5 out of 7)
  - Restricted in communication with faculty (4 out of 7)

## RESEARCH QUESTION 3

What are the experiences of faculty and staff regarding disability support access and accommodations?

- Development of creative accommodations
  - 19 faculty; 5 DS counselors/site administrators
- Accommodation letters are not enough
  - 16 faculty; 3 DS counselors/site administrators

### RESEARCH QUESTION 3, CONTINUED

- Supplementing with other campus resources
  - 12 faculty; 6 DS counselors/site administrators
- Differentiating between accommodations and teaching
  - 11 faculty; 3 DS/site administrators

### RECOMMENDATIONS

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FACULTY

- Communicate proactively with students with ASD you think might be struggling
- Define your expectations for the classroom
- Provide students with choices about how to participate in discussions, topics for assignments, etc.

## RECOMMENDATIONS, CONTINUED

- Find ways to build trust with your students
- Help students regulate their behaviors in the classroom when necessary

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DS STAFF

- Continue finding ways to build rapport with faculty
- Be open with faculty members about what can and cannot be disclosed
- Communicate in person with faculty, as much as possible
- Recommend students take experienced faculty in order to give new faculty time to gain experience

## RECOMMENDATIONS, CONTINUED

- Advertise other campus resources, such as tutors and library services, and how they can specifically help students with ASD
- Collaborate with departments to develop teaching and learning strategies, especially for conceptual content and skills

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SECTION FIVE:  
CONTRIBUTION TO SCHOLARSHIP



To Dr. Ezekiel Kimball, Dr. Ryan Wells, and the journal editorial board:

I am submitting the attached manuscript titled “Faculty Strategies for Fostering Self-Determination in Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.” I, along with my co-authors, Cynthia MacGregor, Jeffrey Cornelius-White, Reesha Adamson, and Tracey Glaessgen, are requesting publication consideration in the *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*.

“Faculty Strategies for Fostering Self-Determination in Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder” uses Garrison-Wade and Lehmann’s framework for students’ with disabilities transition to community college to investigate how faculty are supporting the development of self-determination for students. In addition, the study investigates how faculty and disability support staff communicate to support development of self-determination and their experiences regarding access and accommodations for students with autism. The findings have implications for not only college faculty but also disability support providers as they collaborate with faculty.

The study received Institutional Review Board approval and followed recommended APA protocols for receiving informed consent with participants. The manuscript is not currently under review with any other journal. As the corresponding author for this document, I will communicate important details regarding the manuscript’s review with my co-authors.

Thank you for your consideration,

T. Michelle Hudgens

**Self-Determination and Students with ASD: Faculty and Disability Support Staff  
Strategies**

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## **Abstract**

Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are enrolling in college more frequently, yet graduation rates for these students remain low. One reason posited is a lack of self-determination skills, which help students communicate with faculty and staff and act on goals. This study investigated how faculty at a community college support students in developing these skills, the nature of their communication with disability support services, and the experiences of faculty and disability support staff with accommodations. The study employed basic qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews with 31 faculty, disability support staff, and administrators. Findings include that faculty use specific strategies to communicate with students yet struggle with helping them to regulate behaviors and giving them autonomy. Furthermore, faculty report needing to feel confident in their teaching before they are able to help students with ASD. Faculty, disability support staff, and site directors indicate that rapport and trust are important in communications between faculty and disability support counselors about how to help students with ASD. Yet when these qualities are not present, faculty find safe spaces to access the help they need through informal supports. All groups of participants indicated that while accommodation letters are a good place to start when supporting students with ASD, they provide little help in reinforcing SD skills. Thus, accommodations are supplemented by faculty being willing to work with students beyond the accommodation letter.

*Keywords:* autism spectrum disorder, self-determination, postsecondary education, community college, disability support

## **Self-Determination and Students with ASD: Faculty and Disability Support Staff Strategies**

Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are enrolling in college in record numbers (LeGary, 2017; McKeon et al., 2013; Shmulsky et al., 2017). Yet reports indicate students with ASD have a postsecondary education completion rate of 40% (Newman et al., 2011), which contrasts with approximately 60% completion rate for neurotypical peers (U.S. Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Studies cite many reasons why students with ASD are not successfully completing college degrees, including lack of knowledge about rights and support services and lack of self-advocacy skills (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Cai & Richdale, 2015). Research has also identified students' potential lack of self-determination (SD) skills as a barrier (Richman et al., 2014). SD skills include attitudes as well as actions that assist students in setting goals and taking actions to accomplish them. Studies have indicated that students with disabilities identified SD as crucial to their college success, particularly building relationships with faculty (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Jameson, 2007). Furthermore, Getzel and Thoma (2008) reported that students with disabilities perceived faculty as not understanding their disability or accommodations; thus, SD became important to address this challenge.

Despite the role faculty play in the postsecondary success of students with autism, what has been lacking in current research is faculty's role in supporting students. This gap is a particular concern because, while students with ASD have identified faculty as a primary source of informational support (LeGary, 2017), many students have also acknowledged difficulties communicating effectively with faculty (Cai & Richdale,

2015), have sensed negative attitudes from faculty (Sarrett, 2018), and even felt stigmatization from faculty behavior (Cox et al., 2017). This may not be surprising given that college faculty believe they lack the necessary knowledge to support students with ASD (McKeon et al., 2013; Tipton & Blacher, 2014). College support staff are also part of this conversation. Glennon's (2016) survey found the majority of college personnel who participated in her survey had received multiple trainings on ASD, yet they wanted more information to better help students.

Furthermore, there is little investigation focusing on two-year colleges. Anderson and Butt (2017) noted the flexibility of community colleges as a good fit for students with ASD because of the low cost, ability to take classes part-time without financial aid concerns, and no on-campus housing requirements. Low tuition also means students can afford to take developmental coursework which may be required before college-level courses can be taken (White et al., 2016). While community colleges are seen as a good fit for students with ASD, there is insufficient data regarding students' retention or graduation rates or how well these colleges are serving students' needs (Anderson & Butt, 2017).

Research reveals the breadth of challenges postsecondary institutions face in fully addressing the needs of students with ASD. Therefore, one step in furthering this investigation is to learn how two-year college faculty are adapting their work with students to promote skills for college success, such as fostering self-determination (SD).

### **Self-Determination**

The study of self-determination within higher education is still relatively recent. Broadly speaking, there are two theoretical strands of self-determination: (a) self-

determination theory as it informs intrinsic motivation and (b) causal agency theory (Shogren et al., 2020; Wehmeyer et al., 2018). The latter builds on education and psychology fields (Shogren et al., 2020) and is primarily used when discussing transition planning for students with disabilities entering postsecondary institutions (Wehmeyer et al., 2018). These skills have implications for both academic success and quality of life. First, studies have noted the connection between enhanced SD skills and greater academic success (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Parker & Boutelle, 2009; Richman et al., 2014; Ward & Webster, 2018). Other studies have shown that SD is also connected to lower levels of stress while in school (Richman et al., 2014). Beyond college, SD contributes to improved quality of life, whether from ability to enter and sustain a satisfying career (Kim, 2019), financial independence (Parker & Boutelle, 2009), or forming romantic relationships (Kim, 2019).

Researchers have argued that SD can be developed over time through interventions (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Mumbardó-Adam et al., 2020; Shogren et al., 2020), such as by creating environments which allow students with disabilities to facilitate SD skill development (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Shogren et al., 2020). Furthermore, these environments should be collaborative in nature, with a person of authority providing freedom of choice rather than directive counsel (Richman et al., 2014). While the importance of SD skills for students with disabilities has been relatively established, research specifically focusing on students with ASD is still developing.

### **Faculty and Staff Perceptions**

Research indicates that faculty and staff perceive multiple challenges when working with students with ASD. White et al. (2016) explained that faculty perceive

students with ASD as less successful at self-advocacy and less likely to build crucial connections with their instructors. In Gobbo and Shmulsky's (2014) focus group interviews, faculty noted that students with ASD often violate social norms by missing cues or not being aware of physical boundaries, which may contribute to difficulty making connections. Yet faculty also acknowledged the importance of building one-on-one relationships with these students to reduce stress and anxiety for them in the classroom (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). Faculty have also expressed concerns about helping students develop critical thinking skills since students with ASD may struggle with theory of mind (Myers & DeWall, 2017), which can help them see from another's perspective. Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) found that faculty struggled to help students with ASD develop audience awareness, which made it challenging for students to develop detail in assignments or understand why they needed to provide explanations in their work.

A related issue faculty must consider is balancing appropriate accommodations with promoting students' autonomy (Dymond et al., 2017). While students with ASD may require directed learning, which requires instructors to provide clear directions for tasks, faculty should balance these needs with reinforcement of self-directed behaviors when appropriate (Dymond et al., 2017; Sayman, 2015). This kind of faculty support may go beyond the requirements of disability accommodations and requires an understanding of the individual student's needs, which can be facilitated through continued communication between instructor and student.

These challenges are complicated by the fact that support staff, such as disability counselors, also report feeling underprepared in assisting students with autism (Glennon,

2016). In Glennon's (2016) survey of 315 college personnel across the United States, almost half of the respondents revealed that, despite a variety of trainings on ASD, they believed they needed more information. In addition, two-thirds responded that they struggled to identify appropriate methods for supporting students with ASD. Furthermore, disability support (DS) staff have expressed concern about inability to disclose information about students' experiences to parents because it would violate the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (Dymond et al., 2017).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The framework that guided this study is Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) conceptual framework (GWL) for students' with disabilities transition to community college. Garrison-Wade and Lehmann (2009) developed their framework to make recommendations to improve students' with disabilities transition from secondary to postsecondary institutions, particularly two-year colleges. The researchers concluded there are several elements across both secondary and postsecondary schools for assisting students with disabilities in a successful transition. Three recommendations that impact colleges specifically are developing students' SD skills, ongoing communication between faculty and disability support staff about organizational supports, and improving awareness of access and accommodations for faculty and students (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009).

First, the GWL framework noted the importance of helping students with disabilities develop SD skills. The recommendation most applicable for this study is that postsecondary schools must create environments for students to practice skills and engage with faculty and staff to communicate needs (Garrison-Wade, 2012; Garrison-



Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Mumbardó-Adam et al., 2020). Oertle and Bragg (2014) further noted the importance of instruction in SD skills, rather than just providing the environment to practice them, and Fleming et al. (2017) called for support staff and faculty to model SD skills rather than simply providing accommodations. Furthermore, including students in creating their accommodations plan can help them develop SD skills as they self-advocate and specify needed resources and services (Shepler & Woosley, 2012).

Interwoven with SD instruction and support, according to the GWL framework, is the need for communication, such as between secondary and post-secondary schools, to understand student needs and develop services (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). Equally as important, though, is inter-institutional communication between faculty and DS staff to address potential structural barriers and survey faculty support needs (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009; Oertle & Bragg, 2014). Encouraging open communication is crucial because, as Shelly (2018) found in her investigation into two-year faculty's perceptions of accommodating students with disabilities, faculty may not regularly seek out support from a DS office because faculty believed support staff were too busy, or faculty felt too overworked to be able to meet with support staff. Yet Shelly's (2018) research found faculty desired more open communication so they could better assist their students.

Garrison-Wade and Lehmann (2009) provide a conceptual framework for understanding the importance of faculty support for students with disabilities, including students with ASD. Thus, this study will investigate how community college faculty and

DS staff assist students with ASD in developing SD skills and how faculty access resources to accomplish this goal.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study of general education community college faculty are

1. How do faculty report fostering self-determination skills for students with ASD?
2. What is the nature of the ongoing communication between faculty and disability support staff in assisting students with ASD?
3. What are the experiences of faculty and disability support staff regarding disability support access and accommodations?

### **Design of the Study**

Since this study was focused on (a) faculty's experiences helping students with ASD develop SD skills and (b) faculty's and staff's perceptions of communication and experiences regarding accommodations and disability support access, a basic qualitative research methodology is appropriate. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that basic qualitative research uncovers how participants make meaning of their experiences and construct knowledge, which is relevant for understanding how faculty interpret their experiences supporting students in developing SD. Qualitative research is also a useful methodology for gathering first-hand data from participants about how they perceive their interactions and their awareness of available institutional supports, as called for by the GWL framework. To investigate these perceptions, the study focused on faculty and staff at a Midwestern community college and gathered data in the form of semi-structured interviews with general education faculty and disability support staff.

## **Setting**

The setting for this study was a regionally accredited two-year community college made up of three campuses, two education centers, and an online “campus.” The college is an open-enrollment institution, and, according to the college’s website, it serves approximately 12,000 students (of which over 5,700 are enrolled full time and over 6,000 are part time). The average age of students across all campuses and sites, full time and part time, is 20. Each of the college’s three campuses has a dedicated disability support office, though the office functions differently at each campus. On the largest campus, it is a standalone office responsible for assisting students and faculty with support services. At the other two campuses, it is combined with library, testing, and tutoring services. Each office at the three campuses is overseen by a separate director. The two additional sites, which will be referred to as education centers, are served by disability support counselors housed at the largest campus, and the site directors are a centralized point of contact regarding students with disabilities. Current literature from the college suggests that over 600 students use disability services across the entire college.

## **Participants**

Two categories of participants took part in this study: (a) disability support services staff and directors of education centers and (b) general education faculty from all campuses and education sites. The first group of participants invited to participate were support staff for each of the college’s three campuses and the directors of the two education sites. These groups were identified as participants for similar reasons. They primarily support institutional policies regarding disability services for their campus or site, and thus can offer insights into the resources available to faculty. The directors for

the education sites were chosen since there are no dedicated disability support supervisors at these locations. Thus, the directors are a point of contact for faculty who are assisting students with disabilities and can provide insight into how faculty are supported on their sites. These participants were all included because they represent the institutional support systems which the GWL framework calls for coordinated communication with to support students with disabilities. Of the eleven available participants based on these criteria, two education site directors and five DS counselors consented to participate.

The largest group of participants were full-time general education instructors from the college's three campuses and education centers. General education faculty were identified because students must take basic general education courses, such as college composition or math, to fulfill degree requirements, so these instructors interact with most students who come through the college. As a result, general education faculty are more likely to teach students with ASD on a regular basis. General education faculty are also employed full-time at all campuses and education sites, as opposed to technical education faculty, for example, who do not teach on all of the campuses. Of 27 faculty members invited to participate, 23 members agreed to be interviewed: three from education sites, four from extended campuses, and sixteen from the main campus. Faculty members represented six different general education departments (English, math, social sciences, behavioral sciences, physical sciences, and biology). Faculty participants had an average of 16 years of teaching experience, with 40 years being the greatest and six years the least.

## **Sampling Methods**

Participant selection of faculty played an important role as instructors must have had experience teaching students with ASD. Thus, both purposive sampling and snowball sampling were used to gain “information-rich data” from faculty who had experience teaching students with ASD (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). The DS directors identified instructors for the first round of faculty interviews for the campuses, and the education site directors identified faculty for the centers. After interviews were conducted with the initial round of recommended faculty, snowball sampling was used to identify further participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) who have taught students with ASD. Faculty often share experiences with each other and ask colleagues for advice when they encounter challenges in the classroom; thus, they are likely to know other colleagues they believe have assisted students with ASD in the classroom with unique experiences. Mumbardó-Adam et al. (2020) reinforced this idea. They found that practitioners identified sharing experiences with other professionals as an important form of support in promoting SD skill development for adults with disabilities.

## **Data Collection Tools**

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with all participants. Prior to beginning the data collection process, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the institution to ensure ethical treatment of participants as well as privacy for students on whom faculty and staff are reflecting (Creswell, 2016). As data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, in accordance with Centers for Disease Control (CDC; 2020) recommendations, interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom to maintain social distancing.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection tool because they allow researchers to gather detailed information about participants' perceptions and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Seidman, 2013). The interview process served different purposes for faculty and staff participants. First, the interviews with support staff and directors were conducted to reveal what they recommend faculty do to help students develop SD skills as well as the institutional supports which staff know are available to faculty. The second reason is because support staff and administrators' responses could be used to triangulate data and compare perceptions of communication across the participant groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The same style of interviews was also applicable for faculty participants to allow them to reflect on their experiences (Seidman, 2013) regarding how they interact with students with ASD to develop SD skills. SD is a relatively new concept, and not all faculty may be familiar with it. However, most are familiar with processes for helping students set goals or learn to communicate their needs, for example, which are common SD behaviors. Thus, semi-structured interviews allowed for adaptation of the questioning process to probe faculty's experiences (Seidman, 2013). To facilitate this sort of reflection yet ensure that some standardized information was obtained, an interview protocol was used, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). The GWL framework also guided the protocol for all groups, focusing not just on the way faculty interact with students to develop crucial SD skills but also on how the participant groups communicate with each other to access institutional supports.

## **Data Analysis**

Analysis of all interviews was conducted using the constant comparative method to develop emerging themes from the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as supported by the GWL framework. As recommended by Seidman (2013), the researcher first transcribed all interviews verbatim to become highly familiar with the information. Formal analysis began with line-by-line open coding where segments of data addressing the research questions were identified (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), specifically looking for categories of information (Creswell, 2014) which aligned with the GWL framework regarding the facilitation of SD skills, communication across stakeholder groups, and access of institutional supports. These initial segments were reduced to categories through axial coding, where connections between initial comments were linked together (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Once all transcripts were coded, a memo of emerging themes was written (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), tracking patterns of how faculty interact with students with ASD in developing SD skills, communication between faculty and staff to support students, as well as awareness of institutional supports. These themes were triangulated with codes which emerged from analysis of interviews with support staff and directors. The GWL (2009) framework was used as the lens to analyze codes and “thick, rich description” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257) was sought regarding interactions with students and resources used to allow readers to determine if the findings are transferable to their own settings (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

## **Researcher Positionality**

It is important to note the lead author has been a general education faculty member of the institution under investigation for fifteen years. This role may have impacted the lead author's data collection and analysis in a few ways, such as prior knowledge of DS resources available to faculty or affecting participants' choice of responses during interviews. As a result, the interview protocols were designed to reduce the effects on data collection. Questions were constructed to allow open-ended responses and avoid leading questions. Prior relationships were also considered before data collection. Seidman (2013) cautioned that researchers must be careful not to let relationships with participants affect the interview. Asking DS staff to recommend the first round of participants was intended to reduce potential bias from the lead author choosing participants and increase the odds of interviewing people not encountered previously.

In addition, while no research authors for the study identify as having a disability, the team members were chosen to include scholarly practitioners with experience relevant to the study: two with experience in qualitative research design, one with special education expertise, and one with experience in first-year student academic success. To draw on the other research authors' expertise, the lead author followed Creswell's (2016) recommendation to write theme passages for codes which incorporated thick description and specific quotations from participants to begin developing findings. The other research authors contributed expert review on theme passages to develop rich rigor, resonance, and meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010).



## Findings

### **How Do Faculty Report Fostering Self-Determination Skills for Students with ASD?**

Regarding the methods faculty reported using to foster self-determination skills for students with ASD, five themes emerged: communicating, balancing being direct with providing choices, building trust, supporting behavior regulation, and developing faculty's sense of confidence in teaching.

#### ***Communicating Proactively with Students***

Communication was perhaps the most common theme to emerge from faculty interviews. Twenty out of 23 faculty either shared an example of how they had proactively contacted a student with ASD or acknowledged this was an important part of their role as a teacher. With this theme, faculty employed different strategies. Twenty faculty stated that when they observed a behavior they believed required intervention or noticed the student was struggling, the instructor would ask the student to stay after class or would contact the student via email. Another method faculty employed to encourage communication was building time into their lessons to move among students while they worked. At least six faculty members stated they consciously incorporated time into their lessons for students to work so the instructor could make themselves available to answer questions or assist with lesson content.

However, ten faculty acknowledged that proactive communication as a strategy for developing self-determination has its limitations. Approaching the student seemed counter-productive to developing self-determination skills. Participant 14 expressed this tension: "Sometimes I have where...I am the one seeing the problem and I reach out, and

that is less effective, I think....I'm doing a little of the work to make them successful sometimes.”

### ***Delineating Expectations but Providing Choices***

Related to this balancing act of choosing when to communicate versus when to let students make the choice, 16 out of 23 faculty members discussed the simultaneous need to set clear, direct expectations for classroom behavior while also providing students choices about how to conduct themselves and their work. All 16 instructors discussed the importance of clearly defining expectations for the classroom, such as explaining when students should raise their hands and when not to. Some faculty did this when they introduced syllabus policies for the semester, and others would wait until they observed behaviors that required intervention. Equally as important was allowing students to make choices in order to practice SD skills. Participant 9 explained she hands out an agenda every class so students would know what to expect that day. While she explained she did this so students would know what to plan for, she also said this was a strategy which allowed students with ASD to make choices about how to participate; thus, the participant believed the schedule provided clear directives as well as choices. Other faculty members provided options for assignment topics or modes for participating in discussions.

### ***Building Trust with Students***

Fifteen out of 23 faculty members also stressed the importance of helping students feel a sense of trust, though faculty employed different methods for doing so. Some faculty reflected on how they engaged with students during class discussions or when students expressed anxiety. Another common method that faculty discussed was sharing

their personal experiences or medical diagnoses with the class to encourage students with autism to speak with them. Faculty identified two reasons for doing this: first, they believed sharing made them more approachable, thus encouraging students to deliver and discuss accommodation letters. Second, many instructors hoped students who were not registered with DS would feel comfortable approaching the teacher even if the student did not have formal accommodations through the college.

### ***Supporting Behavior Regulation for Students***

Fifteen out of 23 faculty members shared an example of how they directly regulated a students' behavior when the student appeared unable to do so on their own. Some instructors said they were comfortable directly but politely telling the student to stop, while others worried this would embarrass the student or spotlight the behavior in front of peers. In these cases, faculty worked with the student to come up with codes, such as hand signals, to convey that the student needed to stop a certain behavior. Similar to the theme of communication, though, ten faculty members struggled with the idea of doing the regulation for the student. Faculty knew they needed to manage the class; however, moderating a student's behavior meant the student might not learn when to do it for themselves, thus defeating any development of self-determination.

### ***Increasing Confidence in Teaching***

Furthermore, twelve out of 23 participants reflected on the importance of feeling confident about teaching before they believed they had the capacity to help students develop self-determination. Faculty talked about how they felt less able to help students with ASD at the beginning of their teaching career because the cognitive load of teaching took precedence. Participant 1 referred to this as finding a "comfort zone" in the subject

matter. Similarly, faculty discussed changes over time to their practices which they believed better supported students, such as one teacher who had specialized in developmental writing and found that methods for teaching SD skills in developmental education were also beneficial to students with ASD. Others discussed how their subject area helped them teach SD, such as psychology teachers who developed lessons on learning self-determination.

### **What is the Nature of the Ongoing Communication Between Faculty and Disability Support Staff in Assisting Students with ASD?**

#### ***Faculty Perceptions***

Faculty members' perceptions of the nature of communication with the DS generated three themes: sense of safety, need for transparency, and feelings of inadequacy.

**Safe Spaces for Finding Help.** Seventeen out of 23 faculty members reported needing to feel safe before they can ask for help when supporting students with ASD. Faculty who already had a pre-established relationship with a DS counselor said they would turn to that counselor for help when they needed it. Many described knowing the DS counselors for years and having a friendly relationship with them. On the other hand, 13 faculty reported that they either learned from or asked for help from someone outside of DS. Examples included friends or family members who had children with ASD or other faculty members with whom they had a strong relationship. Participant 3 referred to this as developing a "culture of safety" and how she and her fellow instructors sometimes felt exposed:

The culture around here is that if I ask for help, I must not be good at my job. It's not a culture of safety amongst the instructors for us to be able to learn and grow without looking delinquent at our own jobs.

**Desire for Transparency and Openness.** The need for a personal relationship is echoed in faculty's communication preferences when they do contact DS. Eleven out of 23 faculty members stated they preferred to talk in person, either by stopping by the DS offices or calling the counselor. They believed speaking to a counselor in person allowed both people to express themselves openly or with more details and examples. Thus, the instructors believed they learned more about individual students and how to best help that person. Three faculty members explained that talking in person also relieved worry about how the counselors might interpret intentions. For example, Participant 4 explained needing to trust who she was communicating with because she did not want the counselors to believe she was idly curious about a student's disability or asking them to break privacy restrictions.

**Feelings of Inadequacy.** Ten out of 23 faculty participants expressed feelings related to inadequacy, such as guilt, shame, or being overwhelmed regarding their ability to communicate with DS, which may explain why faculty felt a desire for safe spaces to communicate. While this theme had the fewest participants expressing it, those who did spoke strongly about their feelings. Participant 5 felt guilt for not being able to find the right person to help when a student with ASD who was not registered with DS became overstimulated on field trips. Two faculty members worried they had dominated a DS counselor's time by asking for too much help, and eight faculty felt overwhelmed because they did not have enough time or felt more pressure to help students with other

immediate needs, such as food insecurity. At least three of seven DS counselors or site administrators reinforced this theme by explaining they worried that faculty are not reaching out because they are too busy managing large classes, do not have time to learn new strategies, or even may feel like they “should just know” what to do, as noted by Participant 27.

### ***Disability Support Staff and Administrator Perceptions***

Paralleling faculty’s perceptions were disability support counselors’ and site administrators’ beliefs that they must balance the need for open communication with faculty with the need to support students and maintain confidentiality. This is demonstrated across three themes, including a desire for rapport with faculty, balanced with student autonomy, and awareness of restrictions to what they can communicate to faculty.

**Rapport with Faculty.** Five out of seven DS counselors and administrators identified the importance of relationships with faculty and being approachable. Some used social events, such as campus picnics, to engage with faculty, others described volunteer opportunities which allowed them to work alongside instructors, and some chose to stay after regular work hours to meet with evening instructors. Participant 25 described counselors’ roles as being advocates for faculty, “Students are not served at all if I have an antagonistic relationship with my faculty....I think it would benefit faculty to have someone they felt was their advocate because sometimes I think they don’t feel like they have their advocate.”

**Encouraging Student Autonomy.** While recognizing the importance of building relationships with faculty so instructors feel like they can communicate with them, five

out of seven DS counselors or site administrators also discussed the need to allow students to independently communicate with faculty. Doing this encourages autonomy and self-determination. Participant 26 expressed this clearly: “In the past, we used to send a combination of letters to faculty and sometimes that would initiate, but that takes away the autonomy from the students.”

**Restricted in Communication with Faculty.** Another challenge identified by four of seven DS counselors and site administrators were restrictions on what they can disclose to faculty. One described finding subtle ways to prompt an instructor to think about a student’s behavior in the classroom or other observed signs to figure out how to help the student without directly stating diagnosis or disability. One other explained how they even rely on faculty to help point students to them and how they worry that faculty feel restricted by HIPAA or FERPA regulations. Restrictions on what DS counselors can disclose to faculty and the difficulties this can create was illustrated by Participant 4, a faculty member, who described a conversation with a DS counselor that felt unhelpful:

I just felt like we were only going to talk in vague terms. I’m like, I need this conversation to be real because it’s not helpful to me to talk in vague terms....I get student privacy, and that’s important....[but] sometimes being locked out of that conversation because of privacy is frustrating. I feel like it ties my hands behind my back.

### **What Are the Experiences of Faculty and Staff Regarding Disability Support Access and Accommodations?**

All 23 faculty interviewed identified DS as a resource for supporting students with autism, so there is clear awareness of DS services. However, faculty’s experiences

with accommodations reflect the challenges they face while determining the best way to teach students with ASD. The interviews revealed four themes: developing creative accommodations, believing accommodation letters are not adequate, and needing to supplement with other college resources to supporting teaching and learning. These themes are supported by faculty, DS counselors, and site administrators' perceptions.

### ***Development of Creative Accommodations***

Nineteen out of 23 faculty discussed experiences which taught them to adapt or supplement accommodations to help students. This was likely to occur when students did not have a formal accommodation letter but shared their ASD diagnosis with faculty. However, even when students had a formal letter, faculty conveyed a readiness to help students when they identified helpful strategies that were not in their letter. Twelve faculty expressed they were willing to meet with students extensively during office hours, two described students who brought toys to class to fidget with, and three shared whole class methods for allowing students with ASD to release anxiety when feeling overwhelmed. At least five out of seven DS counselors and site administrators reinforced this need to be flexible. Participant 25, referred to this as getting “creative” and helping faculty feel “ownership” about accommodation plans.

### ***Accommodation Letters Are Not Enough***

While each DS counselor stated the accommodation letter was the primary tool triggering faculty to access DS services, 16 out of 23 faculty stated the letter did not help them enough. Furthermore, three of the seven DS and administration participants also acknowledged the letter had limitations. Faculty recognized the letter was clear about accommodations for students with ASD. However, when asked how knowledgeable they



felt about accommodations for students with autism, 11 faculty stated they did not feel confident, even if they previously stated they were confident about accommodations for students with disabilities in general. This sentiment came from the knowledge that students with autism have varying levels of needs that the letter was not helpful. Furthermore, four faculty saw the letters as always providing the same accommodations with no insight into students' particular needs. Participant 9 summed this belief up when reflecting on the letter: "It's not a bad document. I just don't feel like it's enough for a whole semester of working with a student and individualizing a plan of action."

### ***Supplementing with Other Campus Resources***

While all faculty were aware of the DS office's existence and purpose, 12 out of the 23 faculty participants described relying on other campus resources for help, such as tutoring services. Likewise, six out of seven DS counselors and site administrators acknowledged these resources as tools for faculty to help students with ASD. In particular, faculty at extension sites with no dedicated DS counselor discussed using any available resources. One such instructor, Participant 12, described working with a student who would get overwhelmed and leave the classroom crying each class period: "I really didn't know what to do then...I didn't really have anyone to turn to...rather than me having a conversation in the hallway with her." This participant's campus eventually gained a mental health counselor to whom the instructor could refer students. Other examples of resources included the college's writing or speech and communication centers, an early alert form to notify administration about students struggling in class, and campus librarians.

### *Differentiating Between Accommodations and Teaching*

Reactions to the helpfulness of the letter stemmed from faculty members' differentiation between accommodations (such as extended time on exams) versus teaching and learning strategies (like helping students process abstract concepts when writing academic arguments). Eleven out of 22 faculty expressed this concern, and three out of six DS counselors or site administrators echoed it. While only half of the participants reflected this theme, those who did discuss this differentiation spoke fervently about their concerns. For example, Participant 9, a faculty member, recounted a professional development session she attended about learning to identify potential behaviors which may indicate ASD. The instructor described the session as "frustrating" because learning to identify behaviors did not help with develop teaching strategies.

### **Discussion**

Findings from this study reinforce results from earlier studies. Regarding how faculty help students with autism foster SD skills, communication was the most common theme that emerged. Faculty found proactive ways to open lines of communication with students, including sharing their own stories. Faculty believed being open with students about personal challenges served the dual purpose of opening lines of communication and building trust. This method encouraged students to approach faculty, whether the students had formal accommodations or not. This aligns with Shepler and Woosley's (2012) findings that including students in their accommodations planning may encourage SD skills because it requires them to self-advocate. Furthermore, faculty are modeling SD behaviors for students (Fleming et al., 2017), de-stigmatizing perceptions of disabilities

(Cai & Richdale, 2015), and helping establish crucial relationships (Fleming et al., 2017; LeGary, 2017; White et al., 2016).

Another strategy faculty employed is balancing directness with providing options for students to activate SD skills, which aligns with earlier studies (Dymond et al., 2017; Garrison-Wade, 2012; Sayman, 2015). Directly stating expectations has been found to help students with ASD (McKeon et al., 2013), but providing choices is what Richman et al. (2014) argued is the catalyst for developing SD skills when coaching students. Oertle and Bragg (2014) noted the importance of developing SD skills by modeling and reinforcement. They explained that training faculty and staff may be a vital part of faculty incorporating this into their classrooms, as opposed to just providing an environment where students could do it on their own.

Faculty in the current study also observed they needed safe spaces to share their experiences and get feedback on strategies they employed. This reflects the importance of communication between faculty and DS staff to assist students in a post-secondary setting (Garrison-Wade & Lehman, 2009; Oertle & Bragg, 2014). However, the theme of needing safe spaces also illustrated a breakdown in the lines of communication because faculty did not always turn towards DS services. This theme extends findings from Shelly (2018), who observed that faculty do not regularly seek out services from DS offices. Instead, in this study, faculty reported their communication was directed at peers or friends who had experience with ASD. Seeking out alternate support systems may be due to faculty feeling inadequate in their knowledge or the belief that they or DS counselors are too busy to help, which is also noted by Shelly (2018). While faculty are turning to

DS for assistance, those who prefer to turn to friends, family, or peers, reveal a vulnerability in their ability to openly communicate with DS.

DS staff and site administrators in this study also noted the importance of their communication with faculty. They relied on rapport with faculty to open lines of communication but balanced this with encouraging student autonomy and privacy. Glennon (2016) had related findings, though DS staff in Glennon's study reported concerns about what they could share with parents rather than faculty. Taken together, the findings of this current study plus Glennon's (2016) reveal a challenge in Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) argument for faculty and DS providers to work together on accommodations to "avoid misunderstandings" (p. 420).

A further complication of DS counselors' ability to communicate with faculty is the perception of the role accommodation letters play. Faculty acknowledged that individualizing plans to support students with ASD is important, and thus believed the letter did not help them do this. This extends findings which indicated students present with a variety of needs and require different levels of support (Dymond et al., 2017). It also furthers findings that faculty should make decisions about how to support students with ASD beyond the accommodation letter (Cox et al., 2017; Glennon, 2016).

Coupled with the need to individualize plans were faculty's concerns about differentiating between accommodations and teaching and learning. Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) likewise found that faculty struggled to teach students with ASD conceptual content, such as audience awareness, and Chou et al. (2017) noted that designing methods to help students develop SD skills may be challenging due to students' individual needs. Curriculum development may thus be a particular challenge

for faculty. Ashbaugh et al. (2017) observed that colleges may not offer the full range of supports students may require for success, yet faculty in the current study indicated college supports, such as tutors and counseling services, were a boon to them. This also aligns with results by Dymond et al. (2017) which revealed students with ASD may need different types of college resources depending on personal support systems.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Due to the participant selection and setting of this study, it is limited in its scope in ways which may impact generalizability. First, because participation was restricted to full-time general education faculty, further research is needed to identify perceptions of full-time faculty in other disciplines, such as sciences and technical education. Faculty in these disciplines may perceive different challenges, such as with accommodations since requirements for these disciplines will differ from general education requirements. In addition, this study included only full-time faculty members as participants; adjunct faculty may have differing experiences due to the nature of their work for colleges. In addition, the setting for this study limited its scope since it was conducted at a two-year community college. Therefore, future research will need to include perceptions of full-time and adjunct faculty and disability support staff at four-year institutions.

The results also highlight areas for future research, including perceptions of other faculty populations in addition to developing teaching and learning methods. In particular, the theme of differentiation between accommodations and teaching and learning warrants further investigation. While this theme emerged from fewer participants than many of the other themes, participants spoke insistently about their need to learn strategies for teaching conceptual content. Participants' perceptions may have

developed due to the nature of general education, which more frequently requires conceptual thinking, including writing for varying audiences or evaluating quality of written works, as opposed to disciplines which require more concrete studies, such as technical education. Further complicating this is the fact that not all general education courses require the same level of conceptual thinking, such as classes which may involve hands-on lab work. General education classes which are more likely to teach abstract concepts may include English or other communication fields. Thus, to learn more about teaching and learning strategies to support students with ASD, more targeted research of these academic disciplines is warranted.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study's findings have implications for practice for two college populations: faculty and DS professionals. First, as students with ASD more frequently enroll in higher education, faculty will need more methods to assist them in developing SD skills since students will present with a variety of learning needs. Per the GWL framework (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009), faculty should find opportunities to build trust, perhaps by sharing any personal diagnoses or academic challenges, to encourage students to approach their teachers and activate SD skills. However, faculty should also be willing to proactively communicate when they observe a student struggling, rather than waiting for the student to approach them. Faculty should also establish clear expectations for classroom behaviors from the outset and employ methods suitable for individual students to help them regulate inappropriate classroom behaviors.

Before faculty can employ these methods, DS representatives also need to collaborate with faculty, per the GWL framework (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009).

First, DS services would benefit from helping faculty develop confidence in their skills. For example, when possible, DS staff should consider advising students with disabilities to register for classes with more experienced faculty, in order to give new faculty time to become confident with their content area and lesson planning. Furthermore, DS services should provide training for faculty to recognize signs of ASD and to develop classroom management strategies. However, simply training faculty to recognize signs is not enough for them to feel confident. Results from this study indicated faculty also need help developing teaching and learning strategies, focusing on conceptual content.

Since findings revealed faculty are turning towards peers, friends, and family more than DS, there is also a need to rebuild trust with faculty so DS counselors are a primary source of support for them. This is especially true since faculty reported gaining important information about individual students when communicating in person with DS counselors. The challenge is that faculty may feel guilt or embarrassment for needing assistance, thus leading them to not reach out or perhaps feel threatened in their positions as content experts. Therefore, DS communication should be proactive and collaborative rather than reactionary or prescriptive in nature in order to determine faculty's needs and find creative solutions.

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SECTION SIX:  
SCHOLARLY-PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

As an educator, I believe in the importance of lifelong learning. My desire is to instill a continued love for learning in my students because I recognize how important education has also been in my own life. As a result, my goal is to continue to grow as a learner in service of my teaching and leadership practice. The Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (ELPA) program has shown me actions I can take and practices I can employ in pursuit of this goal, and while coursework taught me these strategies, the dissertation is when I specifically began to employ what I learned in my regular practice. As a scholar, the dissertation journey has taught me to trust processes to guide me, while as a practitioner, the dissertation has shown me the value of using data to inform my work. Ultimately, the experience has transformed me into a more confident leader who trusts her decisions and knows how to access resources to accomplish goals.

### **The Dissertation's Influence on My Practice as a Scholar**

The dissertation process has influenced me as a scholar because it has taught me to “embrace the process, not the plan” as Bansal and Corley (2012) wrote of qualitative research. While quantitative research follows a very specific plan, qualitative research emerges through an iterative process of researching, writing, and data collecting (Bansal & Corley, 2012). I found this to be true as I worked on my project, and even though I did not have hypotheses and a specific statistical plan to test them, the process of investigating, drafting, and data collecting guided me and instilled faith in what sometimes at first seems to be a messy practice.

The first step in the process which worked for me was the careful crafting of research questions to investigate. Creswell (2014) explained questions that guide a research project should include “signposts” (p. 26) which indicate the focus of the

investigation. My signposts drew directly from language in my conceptual framework. I returned to them repeatedly as I drafted an interview script, and again as I began collecting data. Bansal and Corley (2012) argued that qualitative researchers “do not know where they will land” (p. 512) since they are not operating from hypotheses as in quantitative research. This was true for me because during the first few interviews, I was not sure how they were going to help me find answers to my research questions. However, as I continued to listen to my participants’ responses, I could hear patterns begin to emerge because the signposts were showing up in their responses in ways I had not anticipated. I returned to the signposts yet again once I decided on the themes and developed them in the findings. During this stage, one theme presented a challenge because it began to sound like potentially two themes that would need to be divided. I revisited my coding for this theme and created a chart of quotes from my participants. Next, I evaluated the data against what the question was seeking to understand, specifically using the signposts. This helped me decide that part of the theme was not directly addressing the research question; as a result, I revised the wording for the theme and trimmed what was not working from the findings.

Data analysis was another important part of the process I had to trust. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described interview coding using the analogy of a forest and trees. Open coding is described as being in the “trees” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 208) because researchers are noting individual pieces of data, like individual trees, that seem to respond to the research questions. The “forest” (p. 208) is when researchers zoom out of the open coding in order to think about connections across all of the “trees.” Because I once again could return to the signposts in my research questions, it was easier to identify



open codes. I had heard the patterns emerging as I listened carefully to my participants, which Kuckartz (2014) noted is a form of data analysis. Open coding followed by axial coding began to formalize those patterns (Kuckartz, 2014). At first, I was frequently noting open codes in the margin, and after awhile, my coding slowed down. In fact, I began to worry that my later interviews were not producing as much data for me. This is when I zoomed out to look at the “forest” overall. I realized it was not that the interviews were losing quality, but that the patterns had developed to the point that I did not need to note as much data. I understood I was reaching saturation, which Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained as not hearing new information or when any new information is minor compared to the rest of the data body. Zooming out to see the forest revealed I was not coding as much because new data was minor compared to the overall patterns I had already established.

Validity was also an important part of the dissertation process which I learned to trust. Validity can be a complicated issue with qualitative research. Tracy (2010) noted that a researcher must be self-reflexive and aware of any potential bias or subjective values about the topic under investigation. As a teacher who has worked with students with autism and cares passionately about helping them, I had to be conscious of my own personal experiences and how that might affect my interpretation of my participants’ responses. Writing a positionality statement helped me become more conscious of how my perspective and status might influence participant involvement and my interpretation of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2010).

In addition, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that validity in qualitative research relies on being ethical with data and showing how results should “ring true” (p.

238) to readers. Tracy (2010) referred to this as making sure data has resonance with readers. To accomplish this, I reread each theme I created from the perspective of various participants I interviewed while also reflecting on my own preconceptions (Kuckartz, 2014). Many participants had spoken quite frankly about their experiences and even revealed strong emotions during their interviews. Because the findings could not include all the impassioned statements they made, I wanted to make sure the themes did not water down anything about which they clearly had strong feelings. Furthermore, given my own personal experiences with the topic, I did not want to choose themes that reinforced my own perceptions. Rereading the themes through my participants' eyes helped me with this part of the process, and hopefully will allow other readers to be able to determine the level to which the findings resonate with their own experiences (Tracy, 2010).

The literature review was also a crucial part of the process. Not only did the literature review help me find the gap in current research (Galvan & Galvan, 2017) which showed me my topic, it also gave me my conceptual framework, which informed my research questions. In the later stages of my research process, though, it helped me as I began writing my discussion. Even though I knew I had found clear patterns in my data which indicated my themes, I was not sure how these would align with earlier studies in the field. This was especially problematic since the COVID-19 pandemic delayed my work on my dissertation for over two years, and the studies I had read were hazy in my memory. Re-reading the literature review, though, immediately triggered my memory and revealed all the connections back to my findings. Creswell (2014) described the importance of starting any research project with clear and simple ideas. Taking the time to distill complex content into simpler language during my literature review made it easy

to make connections. Furthermore, taking the time to annotate my articles for my literature review (Galvan & Galvan, 2017) helped me while writing the discussion. I was able to easily double check studies as I extended or contradicted them in the discussion of my results.

By trusting the process rather than a plan, per Bansal and Corley's (2012) advice, I also began to trust myself more as a researcher. I still had people supporting and guiding me as I worked, but I was able to develop findings on my own and gain confidence in my skills, essentially gaining perspective on my internal voice as a researcher (Magolda, 2009).

### **The Dissertation's Influence on My Practice as an Educational Leader**

The dissertation also informed my work on a practical level, specifically regarding the role data should play in my work as a leader. As an instructor, the data that largely affected me came from what my department or institution generated. It passively affected me and my practice, but rarely did I play a role in directing it; my work with it was reactive rather than proactive. The dissertation process has taught me that as an educational leader, I need to better understand data's impact on my work to affect the changes I want to see happen in my institution.

First, the dissertation has shown me the importance of understanding people's experiences as a form of data. Datnow and Park (2014) argued that educational reform cannot take place unless we understand the context of the settings, people, and processes which are impacted by reform. Qualitative data plays an important role in revealing people's experiences and providing that context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I found this to be true in my research. My faculty participants shared emotionally charged stories

about ways they believed either they or their students had been hindered by gaps in policies or practices. This led them to not trust institutional resources because they felt like they were on their own. Through my investigation, I realized that for change to happen regarding communication between faculty and DS staff, trust needs to be rebuilt. Datnow and Park (2014) also discussed the importance of trust in reculturing data use in an institution. While I knew this from my readings for the ELPA program, without data from my participants' perceptions, I am not sure I would have fully realized the implications of this for my own institution. I am now more aware of the importance of being open to others' voices as a leader who may have to implement my own policies or practices in the future (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009).

Furthermore, listening to my participants' voices reminded me of the need to build authentic relationships (Taylor, 2009) with those I lead. I believe I would not have been able to gain such rich data from my participants had I not been a fellow colleague who understood their work for the institution and was sincerely interested in what they had to share. According to Taylor (2009), authentic relationships encourage open sharing of information and thus greater understanding of the contexts in which we live and work. If I wish to continue leading by listening to those I work with and gaining their perspective, I must seek out these kinds of relationships with those around me.

The dissertation process also taught me the role data can play in "refueling my tank." Heikkinen et al. (2016) used the analogy of a service station to explain how practitioner research allows educators to develop knowledge of teaching and learning practices as well as to generate knowledge which can be shared with the larger teaching community. Here too, the dissertation process showed me the truth of this. By

interviewing my participants about their experiences in the classroom, I first learned strategies I can use in my own classroom as I work with students with ASD. In fact, I developed a symbol I used in my notes during interviews which indicated something a participant shared that I wanted to try out. In this way, I filled up my own tank with information I can immediately explore in the classroom.

Likewise, I am also able to fuel others' tanks through sharing what I have learned. By collecting my participants' stories and transforming that data into information, I am applying Mandinach's (2012) framework for data-driven decision making. According to this framework, data should not simply be collected for the sake of archiving it; rather, it should be transformed into knowledge which impacts practice. I am able to do this through my practitioner document and thus replenish my greater institutional community. Passing information on will hopefully give others new ideas to try out or even reassure them they are not the only ones using certain strategies. At the institution under investigation for my dissertation, siloed departments and isolated campuses mean there are not many opportunities for sharing strategies or developing conversations. Thus, as a practitioner researcher, I should play a role in leading those conversations (Heikkinen et al., 2016).

Finally, the dissertation process helped me understand my own path to becoming a leader at my institution. Since my top StrengthsFinder results include Empathy and Harmony (StrengthsQuest, n.d.), I gravitate towards leadership styles that emphasize emotional intelligence. Thus, one leadership model that resonated with me was authentic leadership since it emphasizes two types of behaviors: intrapersonal behaviors (such as self-regulation) and interpersonal behaviors (such as building relationships that aid

others) (Northouse, 2016; George et al., 2007). Knowing my strengths and realizing that leadership should be about behaviors rather than charisma (Kochbar-Bryant, 2016) was a relief to me since I am introspective and quiet as I process my thoughts. However, one challenge remained: even though I knew how to activate my strengths and employ specific behaviors as a leader, I was still not sure how I would know what changes to enact in a leadership position within my institution. This is where the dissertation in practice revealed how to use data to create plans for change. As I drafted my themes, I realized they directly told me what actions I would need to take as an institutional leader: increase levels of trust between faculty and DS services, collaborate with instructors to develop teaching strategies to help students with ASD learn conceptual content, and offer opportunities for students to learn self-determination skills. I will need to conduct further research to fulfill these actions, and I will need to navigate structural and political challenges to enact them. However, without the dissertation data, I would not have fully realized how to even begin setting an agenda as a leader (O'Leary, 2005).

Being a leader does not mean innately knowing the answers or what actions to take. Instead, data should shape decision-making for leaders, and while I may not always know where data will take me as a qualitative researcher, I have faith in the process and how it will guide me. Trusting the process of dissertation research has ultimately changed me into a more confident leader and scholar. Mezirow (2009) wrote that transformative learning involves reflecting on prior experiences to make new meaning and influence future actions. To further this idea, George et al. (2007) argued that to be an authentic leader, one must reframe their prior experiences to understand they are not just passive observers of their world; doing so allows them to see themselves as agents of change

driven by their core values. Before the dissertation process, I had gained the knowledge of leadership and research processes from my coursework in ELPA. However, the experience of applying those skills through the dissertation is what allowed me to reframe my experiences as an educator and has transformed my perception of myself as a leader.

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## Appendix A

### Faculty Recruitment Email

Greetings! I am a doctoral student in a joint program with Missouri State University and the University of Missouri – Columbia. I'm conducting research for my dissertation in order to learn about strategies and resources faculty use to help students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the classroom, specifically in developing self-determination skills. These kinds of skills include, among many others, goal setting, problem solving, and decision-making. You have been identified by **(add disability support counselor's name here)** as a faculty member who has worked with students with ASD, and I'm inviting you, as a general education faculty member, to participate in my research by being interviewed.

The interview will take approximately an hour and will ask you questions about your experiences working with students with ASD in the classroom and during more informal moments, such as during office hours. I'll also ask you about strategies you have used as well as challenges you have faced. To conduct the interview, we can meet at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview is completely optional and has no bearing on your employment with the college. My hope, though, is that the interview will give you a chance to reflect on your experiences and plan for the future while also revealing insights that will help me with my research.

If you would like to participate, please let me know as soon as possible. Likewise, if you have any questions about the interview or the research project before you commit, don't hesitate to contact me at [judgenst@otc.edu](mailto:judgenst@otc.edu) or on my office phone at 417-447-7457. You may also contact my adviser Dr. Cynthia MacGregor at

[CMacgregor@MissouriState.edu](mailto:CMacgregor@MissouriState.edu) or 417-836-6046. If you want to talk privately about your rights or any issues related to your participation in this study, you can also contact University of Missouri Research Participant Advocacy by calling 888-280-5002 (a free call), or emailing [MUResearchRPA@missouri.edu](mailto:MUResearchRPA@missouri.edu).

Thank you for your help!



## Appendix B

### Disability Support Staff, Site and Online Program Directors, and Autism Education Specialist Recruitment Email

Greetings! I am a doctoral student in a joint program with Missouri State University and the University of Missouri – Columbia. I'm conducting research for my dissertation in order to learn about strategies and resources faculty use to help students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the classroom, specifically in developing self-determination skills. These kinds of skills include, among many others, goal setting, problem solving, and decision-making. As a disability support specialist/site director/autism education specialist, you would have valuable insight into this topic, and I am inviting you to participate in my research by being interviewed.

The interview will take approximately an hour and will ask you questions about your experiences working with students with ASD and supporting faculty as they work with students with ASD in the classroom. To conduct the interview, we can meet at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview is completely optional and has no bearing on your employment with the college. My hope, though, is that the interview will give you a chance to reflect on your experiences and plan for the future while also revealing insights that will help me with my research.

If you would like to participate, please let me know as soon as possible. Likewise, if you have any questions about the interview or the research project before you commit, don't hesitate to contact me at [judgenst@otc.edu](mailto:judgenst@otc.edu) or on my office phone at 417-447-7457. You may also contact my adviser Dr. Cynthia MacGregor at [CMacgregor@MissouriState.edu](mailto:CMacgregor@MissouriState.edu) or 417-836-6046. If you want to talk privately about

your rights or any issues related to your participation in this study, you can also contact University of Missouri Research Participant Advocacy by calling 888-280-5002 (a free call), or emailing [MUResearchRPA@missouri.edu](mailto:MUResearchRPA@missouri.edu).

Thank you for your help!

## Appendix C

### Script for Verbal Informed Consent

At the beginning of the Zoom session, the researcher will remind the participant that the session will be recorded and stored in a password-protected location. If the participant is not comfortable with recording, alternatives will be discussed, but if they remain uncomfortable with recording, the interview will end. If permission is given to begin recording, the session will begin with the following verbal consent script.

**Script:** Thank you so much for participating in my research! The email I sent inviting you to participate gave you some information on my project, but I'd like to review some of the background to set the stage for today. My research is for my dissertation with the University of Missouri, and my study is focusing on how faculty help students with Autism Spectrum Disorder foster self-determination skills, such as goal setting or networking, for example. I am interviewing disability support counselors, faculty, and education site administrators to understand what faculty are doing and what resources they are using to accomplish that goal. Our interview today should take about an hour. Your participation is completely voluntary and you can choose to end the interview at any time or skip any of the questions. Any quotes or information I use in my dissertation will not be attributed to you; instead, I will use an alias so your identity remains private. If you have any questions or concerns after today, you have several people you can contact. In the email I sent you previously, I included my contact information as well as my adviser's. You can also contact the University of Missouri's participant advocacy

team, and their information is also in that email. Do you have any questions for me before we start? Do I have your permission to proceed with the interview?

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol for Faculty

Participant:

Date:

Start Time:

End Time:

Location:

Bolded sentences are cues for the researcher and will not be read to participants during the interview.

#### **Background Information and Warm-Up Questions**

1. How long have you been a college-level instructor?
2. What courses do you teach for this institution?
3. How much experience teaching online have you had? (follow up as needed to learn whether the experience was only during the move to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.)
4. How much experience do you have working with students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)?
5. Have you taught students with ASD in an online class setting?
6. Can you describe one of your first experiences working with a student with ASD in your classroom?
7. How has your knowledge of working with students with ASD changed since then?

**The following working definition of SD for this research project will be provided in writing as participants answer the next six questions:**

Self-determination is defined as the behaviors which allow an individual to act autonomously in order to establish and accomplish short and long-term goals. This may include using self-regulated behaviors and awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses in order to accomplish established goals. Individuals with strong self-determination are often personally empowered and have a strong sense of self-esteem. In addition, they know how to access resources that will help them accomplish their goals.

### **Understanding Faculty's Experiences with Students with ASD and SD**

8. What prior knowledge or experience do you have of self-determination?
9. What classroom practices or policies do you use that may encourage students to act in a self-determined way?
10. How would you know that a student with ASD is acting in a self-determined way?
11. Describe an experience where you observed a student with ASD struggling in your class due to a lack of SD skills or behaviors.
  - a. Did you assist this student in adapting behaviors or taking actions that reinforced SD skills?
  - b. Did this experience affect your teaching practices long term?

### **Faculty's Experiences with Teaching Students with ASD Online**

**Path A: If faculty have had experience teaching a student with ASD online for at least one full semester, the following four questions will be asked:**

12. How do you think online learning requires students to use SD skills?
13. How do you adapt your teaching for an online setting to support students with ASD as they develop SD?

**Path B: If faculty have only had experience teaching a student with ASD online during the COVID-19 pandemic, only the following two questions will be asked:**

14. When you switched your classes online during the COVID-19 pandemic, did you have any students with ASD? (If no, skip the next two questions.)
15. How well did the student transition to online instruction?
16. Did you have to reinforce any SD skills to help the student transition or be successful in the class?
  - a. If yes, how did you do this?

**Questions to Investigate Faculty's Perceptions of Communication with Disability**

**Support Staff**

17. Who have you worked with in the past to determine how to accommodate a student with ASD?
  - a. If disability support staff are not named, I will ask directly if they have worked with disability support.
18. How often do you contact disability support for help?
  - a. If they contact DS on a regular basis or frequently, what do you contact them about?
  - b. If they do not contact DS very often, why do they not?
19. If you have communicated with DS, how have you communicated with them? (for example, email, phone calls, in person, etc.).

**Questions to Investigate Faculty's Experiences of Access and Accommodations**

20. How knowledgeable do you feel about accommodations for students with disabilities? For students with ASD?

21. What resources are you aware of that could help you learn more about helping students with ASD develop SD skills?
22. What, if any, training have you attended for working with students with ASD?
23. How comfortable are you providing accommodations for students with ASD in your classroom?
24. Is there anything else you want me to know about your experiences working with students with ASD or disability support services?

Thank you for sharing your experiences and knowledge with me!



## Appendix E

### Interview Protocol for Disability Support Staff, Directors, and Autism Education

#### Specialist

**Participant:**

**Date:**

**Start Time:**

**End Time:**

**Location:**

#### **Background Information and Warm-Up Questions**

1. How long have you been in your current position?
2. What is your role in supporting general education faculty?
3. How long have you worked with students with disabilities? (For directors, the question will be reworded as: What is your role in working with students with disabilities?)
4. How much experience do you have working with students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) specifically?
5. What do you believe is the greatest challenge general education faculty face in supporting students with ASD?

#### **Questions to Investigate Communication and Interaction with Faculty**

6. Describe your role in working with general education faculty.
  - a. In what ways do you interact with faculty?
7. How often do general education faculty reach out to you for help regarding helping students with disabilities?
  - a. If not very often, why do you think they do not reach out?
  - b. If often, why do you think faculty reach out as often as they do?

- c. What are the most common questions or requests faculty have?
8. How often do you initiate communication with general education faculty (if participant is a director, question will specify initiating communication about students with disabilities)?
  9. Are there any barriers in your ability to communicate with general education faculty (if participant is a director, question will specify the communication is about helping students with disabilities)?
  10. Are there certain times of the semester or events that cause general education faculty to communicate with the disability support office (DS)?
  11. Are there ways that DS encourages general education faculty to communicate with you?
  12. What do general education faculty most commonly request help with when working specifically with students with ASD?

**Questions to Investigate Experiences of Access and Accommodations**

13. How knowledgeable do you feel about accommodations for students with ASD?
14. How aware do you believe general education faculty are about access of DS?
  - a. How are do you believe they are about accommodations for students with disabilities? (If participant is a director, question will specify faculty on their site.)
15. What supports are currently in place to help faculty learn to assist students with disabilities? (Note: If participant is a director, the question will specify supports on their site or for online instructors. If the director says there are no supports, the next two follow up questions will be asked.)

- a. Why do you think there are no supports offered?
  - b. Do you think faculty would take advantage of these if they were offered?
16. How often do faculty take advantage of these supports?
- a. If not very often, why do you think they do not?
  - b. If regularly or often, why do you think they do?
17. Are there additional institutional supports, beyond the autism education specialist, for faculty in learning to support students with ASD?
18. How does disability support provide assistance to faculty teaching students with ASD online?
19. Are there services or resources you wish faculty were more aware of which disability support offers?

Thank you for sharing your experiences and knowledge with me!

## VITA

T. Michelle Hudgens found a passion for learning and research as a journalism major and English minor at Louisiana Tech University. Whether it was searching through peer-reviewed journals or learning about Boolean search terms, she enjoyed all parts of researching, discovering new knowledge, and reporting it for a variety of audiences. Michelle also learned to love coaching writing as an editor for her college's newspaper.

After graduation, she carried this love of writing on to her master's degree studying children's literature at Missouri State University. While at Missouri State University, she worked as a graduate assistant teaching college composition classes. This is when she learned she learned she could combine all of her passions about researching and writing by coaching students as they learned to write.

Michelle went on to work for Ozarks Technical Community College as an English instructor, teaching developmental writing, college composition, and children's literature, as well as co-teaching history and literature of the Holocaust. Working at a community college allowed her to continue sharing her love of writing with students and also instilled in her a dedication to advocating for students. Working with students at a community college showed her the importance of empowering students by giving them a voice through their writing. The highlight of Michelle's semester is when a student tells her, "I didn't know I could actually write until you showed me I could." Her belief in speaking up for those who are not able to is what led her to the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis doctoral program with the University of Missouri. She hopes that earning her doctorate will open more doors for her to continue advocating for students.