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AN EVALUATION OF COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS AND STAFF INCLUSION
PRACTICES FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

by

KIMBERLY V. BRACEY

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Major: Higher and Adult Education

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my husband, children, parents, and siblings for their love and continued support. Thank you to my dissertation chair and committee for the resources and endless support as well as for pushing me to move forward through a global pandemic. Being a parent of an autistic child, I also dedicate this study to the parents of children on the autism spectrum, as social support means and inclusion for autistic children continues to be sought in a world that is steadily trying to identify the unmet needs of children on the autism spectrum.

Acknowledgments

I am so grateful to God for placing people in my life to get as far as I have. To my students and education coworkers who have supported me throughout this process: I acknowledge you as my friends and my support system that has helped me to move forward. I would also like to acknowledge those former employers and instructors who told me I would only be good as a secretary and that I could never receive a degree being a mother. I thank them for this negative feedback because it pushed me to move forward and accomplish more than the one degree, they said I would never get, but to earn five degrees instead. I would also like to acknowledge those who supported me in silence and out loud and prayed for me and my family.

Thank you to my children whom I live and breathe for. It is because of you that I am motivated to never stop. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my husband, whom I am blessed to also call my friend, and who has been by my side throughout this process.

Abstract

Autism is a neurobiological disorder characterized by impairment in social interaction, communication, and repetitive stereotyped patterns of behavior. Autism rates have continued to increase in the United States and a cause or cure has not yet been found. In 2012, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder increased from the rate of 1 in 150 in 2000 to 1 in 88 in 2008. When students in high school desire to transition from secondary to postsecondary education, college brochures, and other marketing advertisements appear to target the general education student. College advertisements rarely target students with neurobiological disorders such as autism. It was not until the early 2000s, when celebrities like the iconic comedian Gilbert Gottfried and singer Toni Braxton spoke out about their children's autism diagnosis, that the public began to learn more about this disorder. This study evaluated the inclusive practices of university administrators and staff in the department that assist undergraduate students with different abilities such as autism spectrum disorder at a university in the mid-South. The inclusive practices that were evaluated included transitioning from high school to higher education, accommodations for the classroom curriculum, the perspectives of parent and student feedback in policymaking, and campus social life. Furthermore, by using the Critical Disability Theory as a theoretical framework and the process/implementation evaluation method, I understood how university administrators and staff generated cooperative connections with undergraduate autistic students to address matters that are inclusive to the needs of undergraduate students with autism and how this student population is impacted by the development and implementation of the policies that have been designed to support them in their educational journey.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Traditional college and university administrators (i.e., recruiters, curriculum developers, admission staff, compliance officers, academic counselors and coordinators, and student services advisors) are responsible for the maintenance and supervision of the institution's operations, which includes accommodating students whom they expect to stand out in society and represent their schools well. These administrators' objectives are to provide support and services that groom their students to be career-ready and catalysts for social change. However, many students with disabilities, such as autism, often feel forgotten, overlooked, or not included in the administration's objectives (Berube, 1998, as cited in Rocco, 2005). Administrators practice inclusion when they seek, include, and accommodate all students, regardless of cognitive or academic level, thus providing opportunities to be included in general education classrooms and to participate in standards-based curriculums (Etscheidt & Bartlett, 1999). Rocco (2005) noted that many adult college and university students with disabilities, such as autism, are marginalized and lack reasonable accommodations.

Autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that hinders social communication and behaviors (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). In many university environments, students with ASD who require special accommodations must get assistance from an ASD department administrator, and the administrator will reach out to the professor to best accommodate the students (Wright, 2017). However, the nature of ASD is characterized by significant impairments in social interaction and communication skills, making it difficult for college and university staff to identify ASD students, as many students with ASD fail to inform the administrative staff that

they have ASD (Hillman, 2019). College and university students are viewed as adults; therefore, the same level of protection and inclusion practices that a student with ASD may have received from former teachers and peers in secondary school may not be extended on a college or university campus (Wright, 2017). This chapter includes a detailed background of inclusion for disabled students in higher education. The chapter also includes the problem and purpose statements, followed by the research questions, the theoretical framework, the significance of the study, limitations, and delimitations, and closes with a study overview.

Accardo et al. (2019) noted that although college may be a gateway to success, college has limited access for young adults with ASD. Furthermore, Accardo (2017) cited how research is gradually depicting the first-hand experiences of students with ASD and their college experiences. Some of these indicators noted by researchers and detailed by students with ASD included barriers in both academic and non-academic environments to achieve college success. Some reports regarding undergraduate students on the autism spectrum, according to Accardo (2017), included, but were not limited to, “good grades, self-efficacy, graduating, parental support. Access to accommodations and social opportunities” (p.574). Some barriers to success according to Ward and Webster (2018) were also linked to “unmet social/emotional needs such as feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and depression (p.373).”

The transition from secondary school to college can be different for any first-time college student; however, this transition for students with ASD is unique because high school students with ASD are typically (a) in restrictive environments, (b) receive Individualized Educational Plans, and (c) have more one-on-one interaction with their teachers throughout their secondary education experience (Uretsky et al., 2019). The peers of students with ASD usually embrace them during the elementary years if they see that the student with ASD needs more attention than

the average student (Boutot, 2007). Traditional college students are viewed as adults; therefore, the same level of protection and nurturing that a student with ASD may have received from their teachers and peers in secondary school may not be extended on a college campus (Arnett, 1994).

Multiple laws protect students with any disability. Enactments such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990) and the American Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) require that students with disabilities have access to public education and ensure that accommodations are made to provide necessary services (IDEA, 1990). IDEA was originally known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was amended to IDEA in 1990 to incorporate provisions that provide students with disabilities the same opportunities as any student without a disability (IDEA, 1990).

Higher education administrators and their staff need to understand the importance of supporting students with ASD. I believed it was also important for parents to understand how their involvement impacts policy development for students with ASD. This qualitative study will allow university administrators, university staff, and parents of students with ASD to evaluate the practices of inclusion for undergraduate students with ASD who are attending a state university in the mid-South.

Background of Study

Historically, the practice of inclusion for students with disabilities in higher education did not exist until 1817 with the founding of the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, which was the first school for disabled people in the United States (Madaus, 2011). People with disabilities were considered a source of shame and were often placed in institutions (Borson, 2017). It was not until 1864 that people with disabilities could attend university and

receive degrees (Madaus, 2011). According to Duncan (2015), almost 2 million students with disabilities continued to be excluded from the public education system into the late 20th century. Members of the U.S. Congress enacted multiple laws to protect students with disabilities with enactments such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. In 1990, members of the U.S. Congress passed the American Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), which required that students with disabilities have equal access to public education.

Hillier et al. (2021) found that students with ASD who transition to the college environment have common stressors when transitioning from secondary school to the university environment. Hillier et al. (2021) also noted that parents exhibited concerns about how their child with ASD would be academically and socially successful on a college campus. Hillier et al. explained that, although the enrollment rates for students with ASD are increasing and these students may be knowledgeable in their field of interest, these students may face a wide range of interpersonal and nonacademic challenges. Parents seeking postsecondary options for their child want to ensure inclusion is executed in the postsecondary environment and that their child with ASD will thrive in “social skills, executive functioning, academics, campus living, and support services” (Hillier et al., 2021, p. 89).

The outcome of students with ASD has been a concern among scholars because students with developmental disabilities are more likely to experience lower rates of employment than students who were in general education environments (Szepe, 2019). To encourage inclusion, college recruiters should include wording in their marketing campaigns and physical presentations that inspire students with ASD to enroll in college (Black et al., 2015). Students with ASD should be assured that they, just like any other student, will encounter great support in the college system. Students with ASD should also be confident that they will increase their

ability to organize, plan, regulate behavior and exhibit self-control through college support systems (Hillier et al., 2021).

Students must be provided equal opportunities regardless of their abilities without all the attention being focused on their disability. In addition, students with ASD should be provided opportunities for social activities outside of the classroom (Black et al., 2015). Colleges and universities alike should provide on- and off-campus accommodations for students with developmental disabilities (Hughes et al., 2016). Moreover, the traditional means used to accommodate this population must be upgraded so that students with any type of disability can be successful in their degree programs (Hughes, et al., 2016).

Although students with ASD have commonalities, everyone has multiple experiences and falls differently on the spectrum (Halisy, 2019). Thus, the conditions of students with ASD in university settings must be consistently studied, including how to best address these students' conditions in multiple environments (Halisy, 2019). Kimball et al. (2017) posited that students with ASD can play a role in the recruitment process when they are engaged effectively because the university administrators and recruiting staff are aware of the connections with students with disabilities. Administration and recruiting staff are also aware of how students with ASD interact with the world and what accommodations will help students with ASD find their purpose in supportive environments (Kimball et al., 2017).

Over the years, colleges have increased the efficiency with which students can receive college degrees; however, more creative, universal tactics must be implemented to ensure success and inclusion among students with ASD in comparison to their non-ASD peers. Moreover, students with disabilities such as ASD tend to have the poorest postsecondary outcomes (Hart et al., 2006), and until the early 2000s, students with ASD were segregated in life

skills or community-based transition programs (Hall, 2019). Nevertheless, students with disabilities and their teachers can benefit when these students experience a higher education environment (Bolt, 2017). Some students with disabilities may find it more possible to excel in the college classroom environment as they seek a sense of independence (Bolt, 2017). The transition from the secondary classroom to the college classroom may affect the academic and social abilities of students with disabilities; conversely, higher education institutions have advanced and can provide resources for this population (Bolt, 2017).

Schools that offer little information about their abundance of student resources present challenges for students with ASD (Dong & Lucas, 2016). Students with disabilities such as ASD and/or their caregivers should be educated about their available campus resources (Dong & Lucas, 2016). Kreider et al. (2015) suggested that students with ASD be allowed to have rehabilitation officers on their college campuses and that higher education institutions create research-intensive partnerships with community businesses to determine the practices needed on college campuses to support students with disabilities. Kreider et al. (2015) also discussed the importance of providing appropriate resources and guidance for students with ASD.

Gavira and Morina (2015) identified barriers that students with intellectual disabilities must navigate. Gavira and Morina (2015) also found that the college environment is generally comprised of students who are from standard secondary classrooms. Some of those challenges found concerning ASD students who transition from high school to college would be social interaction, relationship development, preservative thought patterns, or restricted behaviors and interests (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). These identifiable challenges have prevented universities from measuring the growth in this population and determining what is needed for their success (Gavira & Morina, 2015). Originally, Grigal and Papay (2018) recommended that administrators re-

evaluate how students with intellectual disabilities can be served equitably and consistently modify their plans to serve all their campus' students.

A large percentage of prior research indicated that college administrators strategized efforts to avoid singling out students with disabilities. Administrators want students with disabilities to feel just as welcome as any other student; however, administrators lack the funding for resources and more technology to better accommodate these students. Fossey et al. (2017) noted that students with ASD feel a need to be a part of the school population to succeed, but the perception of inclusiveness is difficult to accomplish. Students with disabilities are less likely to participate in campus clubs, other extracurricular activities, and sports that may require a lot of physical activity (Marr, 2015). The dropout rate for ASD students has increased due to academic challenges and social interaction challenges (Qian et al., 2018).

Qian et al. (2018) reviewed a coaching model that assisted with social interaction for students with disabilities such as ASD. Qian et al. (2018) postulated that students with ASD need more academic support, such as an academic coach who can assist with classroom preparation, coursework assistance from semester to semester, and teaching effective study habits. Qian et al. (2018) further asserted that the dropout rates of students with ASD may decrease, and the retention rates may increase through implementing more academic support in this coaching model.

College administrators must create a university community that is welcoming for students with disabilities such as ASD (Marr, 2015). In a study of college advisors, Marr (2015) discovered that college advisors have limited knowledge of how to include students with ASD equally among their non-ASD peers. Although some students received assistance from administrators during their degree process, advisors who were assigned to students with ASD

were too neglectful or unresponsive to know the exact growth and success rates of this population (Marr, 2015).

Students with ASD do not want to be stigmatized, and many are aware of the laws that protect them. Public officials should intervene with college administrators regarding certain obligations public officials have with college campuses (Hall & Tinklin, 1998). Nonacademic adaptations for students with ASD could be used to increase the success of this population. Further, a study by Arcus (2010) suggests that accommodations for students with any disability can be improved to enhance the learning environment for this group of students.

Sachs (2011) reported data that indicated that students with disabilities had achieved academically almost as much as their peers without disabilities. On the other hand, Sachs (2011) also noted that students with disabilities such as ASD have different experiences and struggle more to meet the demands of course requirements. According to Sachs' data, these students participated less in activities outside of the classroom. Inclusion is still a problem for students with ASD; therefore, academic standards and curriculums must be adjusted (Sachs, 2011).

College professors prepare their lessons with their general education students in mind (Wright, 2017). University professors recognize that students with disabilities such as ASD require special accommodations; however, professors also know they are not legally required to design a curriculum that focuses strictly on their population. According to Berg et al. (2017), there are gaps in how to identify students with disabilities such as ASD on college campuses. Pinder-Amaker (2014) noted that those gaps could be, but not limited to, the heightening of public awareness of ASD, improved screening for ASD, changes in diagnostic specification, and improving the ability to recognize and diagnose high-functioning students with ASD who may have been previously overlooked (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). Moreover, although students with

ASD may seek a postsecondary education, reputable programs are not readily prepared to receive them (Berg et al., 2017). Adults with disabilities such as ASD are held to the same expectations as those who received a general education and are expected to perform using the skills earned in their degree programs (Berg et al., 2017), which increases stress levels among students with ASD (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). Many students with ASD struggle to adapt to the university campus. Even students who live in the comfort of their homes are challenged to stay on top of their studies and manage the requirements of their course loads (Pinder-Amaker, 2014).

Statement of Problem

According to Hillman (2019), secondary schools are mandated to identify students with disabilities, whereas universities are not required to identify students with ASD. College students with ASD are considered adults who are responsible for their education (Hillman, 2019). Students with ASD do not have to inform the school that they have ASD, however, they can obtain on-campus accommodations that provide disability support (Hillman, 2019). In many university environments, students with ASD who require special accommodations must get assistance from an ASD department administrator, and the administrator will reach out to the professor to best accommodate the students (Wright, 2017). This method resulted in gaps in the identification of students who readily find reputable college programs that are accommodating for students with intellectual disabilities (Berg et al., 2017; Wright, 2017).

Students with ASD have little access to resources for training and financial wealth-building (Vest, 2020). These resources include information on careers in technical fields that may require little to no coursework (Vest, 2020). Vest (2020) found that at least 22% of students with any disability were unemployed one year after graduating from high school. Of this same population of students, at least 56% were enrolled in college programs (Vest, 2020). Vest also

noted that some students with developmental disabilities such as ASD dropped out of high school or remained in ASD programs after their 18th birthday, whereas the students without developmental disabilities went on to obtain full-time careers or attend traditional colleges and universities. Therefore, this evaluation of the inclusive practices for undergraduate students with ASD could educate university administrators and staff on how to better accommodate students with ASD and prepare them for life after graduation.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, process evaluation study was to evaluate how college administrators and staff develop and apply inclusion practices for undergraduate students with ASD at a university in the mid-South. ASD is a developmental disability that can influence social, communication, and behavior challenges (CDC, 2020). Moreover, there are multiple levels of ASD, and students with disabilities comprise 11% of the student population in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, as cited in Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019). In this study, I described the academic and social inclusion practices implemented by the administration and staff at the university and evaluated the success of those practices. I defined academic and social inclusion practices as practices for students with different abilities being given the same educational setting(s) as their normally developing peers with the appropriate support services rather than being isolated in separate classrooms (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). I defined the success of those academic and social inclusion practices as practices that have been proven through evidence-based strategies that have been applied in the college classroom and have been documented with metrics revealing graduation rates.

Research Questions

I addressed inclusion practices for students with ASD at a university in the mid-South by seeking the answers to specific questions. The guiding research questions for this study were as follows:

1. How successful are the academic and social support practices implemented by administrators and staff at a university in the mid-South in promoting inclusion for undergraduate students with ASD?
 - a. How do college administrators and staff apply practices to promote inclusion for students with ASD?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this proposed study came from Melinda Hall's (1990) critical disability theory. According to Hall (2019), "CDT refers to a diverse interdisciplinary set of theoretical approaches that analyzes disability as a cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon" (p. 1). I used the social and cultural tenets of the CDT outlining the social model of disability, voices of disability, and multidimensionality (Hosking, 2008). The CDT also involves "scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments, but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations" (Hall, 2019, p. 1). The Autism Research Institute (n.d.) defined ASD as "a developmental disorder with symptoms that appear in the first three years of life" (p. 1.) The Autism Research Institute also included information about how the word "spectrum" in the diagnosis term of ASD indicates that there are different forms, or levels, of severity. Bearing this in mind, administrators and community members must treat those with

ASD as individuals to identify each person's "strengths, symptoms, and challenges" (Autism Research Institute, 2021).

Significance of Study

The findings from this study are beneficial to college administrators and staff with disability resource departments that provide accommodations for students with ASD. The benefits for college administrators and staff from this study will be that college administrators and staff can discover how to proactively recruit students with ASD in the higher education process as it makes better business sense according to Endlich (2021). This would make better business sense because as Endlich (2021) also noted students with disabilities overall would represent an untapped market (p.50). The National Center for Education (NCES) has reported according to Endlich (2021) that nineteen percent of undergraduate students have disabilities. Bearing this in mind, training faculty on accommodating students with ASD, and familiarizing this group of students with other aspects of college life could help college administrators craft a supportive campus environment for students with ASD.

Theoretically, I considered CDT for this study to assure that the reader understands how applicable the theory is to the study and its significance. Practically, I also believed that this study could serve as a contribution to the field of intellectual disabilities such as ASD and neurodiversity as college administrators review and draft their policies for the ASD student population. By recognizing neurodiversity and inclusive practices for students with ASD, colleges could hire "accessibility consultants, train admissions officers in issues important to disabled students and their families, and invest in institutional research that assesses that campus climate for students with disabilities" (Endlich, 2021). Continued dialogue has taken place on college campuses about addressing the needs of emerging adult students with ASD (White et al.,

2017); however, minimal discussions have taken place regarding those adult students with ASD who do not inform the school of their intellectual disability to receive the proper accommodations. By enhancing the engagement efforts of faculty and staff on college campuses by representing students with ASD just as other minoritized groups are, such as “First-Gen” and LGBTQ+, students with ASD are likely to not feel isolated but more welcomed by positive messages being communicated to them for their admissions (Endlich, 2021). Students with ASD could be more prone to disclose their diagnosis and receive the accommodations they are needing (Endlich, 2021).

Students with ASD are enrolling in college at increasing rates (Chandrasekhar, 2020); therefore, this study will aid college and university administrators in advocating for policies that will promote the experiences of students with ASD. College administrators who craft policies for ASD students will be able to use this study to consider developing a curriculum and accommodations for those who have or have not disclosed their ASD by discretely making it available to their department administrators. Furthermore, college administrators will be able to analyze the policies for ASD students already in place and decide how ASD students can be best supported academically and socially by “including diversity of abilities on freshman profile webpages, including photos of students with disabilities in admission office décor, marketing materials, and on web pages and/or social media content, and encouraging the formation of relevant clubs and disability cultural centers” (Endlich, 2021).

Researchers are still examining the challenges encountered by ASD students with their social and communication skills on college campuses and their transition processes from home to the college campus (Chandrasekhar, 2020). College administrators could utilize this study to enhance their efforts in recruitment, accommodations, and campus life all while modifying their

academic lens for students with ASD. Moreover, as parents carry out the duties of caring for their child with ASD assuring they are equitably educated in the higher education process and other demands regarding their care, college administrators and staff could intervene with local school districts in identifying the needs at the secondary level to be able to make a more seamless transition to the postsecondary level. Additionally, colleges could use this study to identify how to provide transparency about accessibility and inclusiveness to parents who are researching schools for their child with ASD. Being clear about what is readily available for students with ASD aids the parents in identifying proper support systems that may already be in place for their child. Moreover, college administrators will gather from this study that both academic and non-academic supports being frequently provided for students with ASD from university disability centers, counseling services, and faculty could successfully lead to this population of students being awarded a baccalaureate degree (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019).

The current literature indicated a gap in the identification of students with ASD who readily find reputable college programs that are accommodating for students with intellectual disabilities (Berg, et al., 2017; Wright, et al., 2017). With universities not being required to identify students with ASD, the population of students with ASD are responsible for notifying their school of needed support systems and/or accommodations. As the rate of students with ASD continues to escalate, this study will influence the decision-making processes of college administrators and staff in inclusively and equitably providing an education for students with ASD without making them feel isolated by having a disability that seems “invisible.”

Limitations

In consideration of laws surrounding the Family Educational Rights Act (FERPA), students with ASD could not be included in the interview process. The process evaluation study assisted in identifying the methods used in the promotion of inclusion and practices by college administrators and staff at a university in the mid-South; however, I was limited by only performing this study at one university in the mid-South. College administrators and disability support staff must maintain the confidentiality of data; therefore, it limited the access to certain data to determine if inclusive practices by college administrators have been successful in the higher education processes for students with ASD. Additionally, research has suggested one gap as being how to identify students with ASD who have not disclosed their intellectual disability to their college administrators or staff (Endlich, 2021); consequently, there may be some data unaccounted for when it comes to having accurate graduation numbers for students with ASD and the percentage of students with ASD enrolled.

Delimitations

The focus of this study was to evaluate how college administrators and staff promote inclusion practices for undergraduate students with autism at a university in the Mid-South. The department where the administrators and staff were interviewed was a division of the higher education campus and represented the academic and non-academic support functions for disabled students at this university. The information I gathered in this study should only apply to those I interviewed that oversee and make decisions for students with ASD. Additionally, the data collected should only be used for those students with ASD who are pursuing baccalaureate degrees. Using the process evaluation method contributed to answering my research questions by distinguishing the inclusion processes of administrators and staff that illustrated the promotion of

inclusion processes for students with ASD which have successfully resulted in college graduation.

Definition of Terms

Academic support: Academic support refers to a wide variety of instructional methods, educational services, or school resources provided to students in an effort to help them accelerate their learning progress, catch up with their peers, meet learning standards, or generally succeed in school (The Glossary of Education Reform, n.d.).

ADA: The ADA (1990) prohibits discrimination based on disability in employment, state and local government, public accommodations, commercial facilities, transportation, and telecommunications. The ADA also applies to the United States Congress.

ASD: ASD is a complex developmental condition that involves persistent challenges in social interaction, speech and nonverbal communication, and restricted or repetitive behaviors. The effects of ASD and the severity of symptoms are different in each person (American Psychiatric Association, 2021).

Association of Higher Education and Disabilities (AHEAD): Since 1977, AHEAD has offered an unparalleled member experience to disability resource professionals, student affairs personnel, ADA coordinators, diversity officers, information technology staff, faculty and other instructional personnel, and colleagues who are invested in creating welcoming higher education experiences for individuals with disabilities (Association of Higher Education and Disability, 2021).

Career readiness: Career readiness is the attainment and demonstration of the required competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace (National Association of Colleges and Employers, n.d.).

College administrator(s): College and university administrators plan, organize, maintain, develop, coordinate, and oversee the various programs in public and private colleges and universities. Administrators may be responsible for a variety of tasks ranging from financial aid to student activities (The University of Arizona, n.d.).

Developmental disability: Developmental disability refers to a group of conditions resulting from impairments in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas. These conditions begin during the developmental period, may impact day-to-day functioning, and usually last throughout a person's lifetime (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.-c).

Disability: Historically, the term "disability" has been used either as a synonym for "inability" or as a reference to legally imposed limitations on rights and powers (Hall, 2019).

Higher education: Higher education is education beyond high school, especially at a college or university (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a).

Inclusion: Inclusion is the act or practice of including students with disabilities with the general student population (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b).

Inclusion practices: In higher education (HE), inclusion is the ongoing and transformative process of improving education systems to meet everyone's needs, especially those in marginalized groups (GovNet Education, 2020).

IDEA: IDEA, formerly called P.L. 94-142 or the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975, requires public schools to make free appropriate public education available to all eligible children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their individual needs (IDEA, 1990).

Neurodiversity: Neurodiversity is the concept that differences in brain functioning in the human population are normal and that brain functioning that is not neurotypical should not be stigmatized.

Social model of disability: The social model of disability proposes that what makes someone disabled is not their medical condition, but the attitudes and structure of society.

Social support: Social support refers to the overall perception one has of feeling included and cared for in a community of peers, teachers, caregivers, and others. Social support is critical for promoting positive academic and psychosocial outcomes for students (Grapin et al., 2016).

Study Overview

During grade school, educators prepare students to have a mindset to be their best, and one way to do this is to earn a college degree following their high school graduation. Transitioning from high school to a college or university setting may be more feasible for the non-ASD student than the student on the autism spectrum, who may find the transition to be a challenge. Pinder-Amaker (2014) proposed developing more effective transition plans for students with ASD (p.125). Students with disabilities such as ASD who are transitioning from high school into higher education need adequate support to thrive in a college setting both socially and academically (Van Hees et al., 2015). Students experience fewer difficulties in the engagement process when they have proper support when dealing with difficult new situations, unexpected changes, social relationships, problems with information processing and time management, and doubts about disclosure.

Some prior literature includes information about how students with disabilities such as ASD can function or transition to college or university campuses following their secondary

departure; however, this research is limited. Furthermore, a paucity of literature expands on the topic of undergraduate student inclusion practices by college administrators and staff on college campuses. In Chapter 2, I will investigate the current literature on inclusion practices for students with ASD, CDT, and the role of administrators and staff regarding policy development for undergraduate students with ASD. Chapter 3 will delineate the chosen research design, methodology, data collection, and data analysis methods. The thematic analysis presented in Chapter 4 provides an overview of the study's findings. In Chapter 5, the findings are interpreted, related to the literature, and recommendations are given for further research and action.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The literature review covered the development of transitional plans for students with ASD to a post-secondary setting, recruitment increases for students with ASD in college settings, Critical Disability Theory, and inclusion effectiveness for undergraduate students with ASD. Cox et al. (2017) mentioned that the “critical holes in empirical literature presently make it difficult to develop large-scale, evidence-based interventions for college students with ASD” (p.71). To rectify this, authors Harbour and Greenberg (2017) suggested that policy and inclusive practice recommendations “include evaluations of a college’s existing disability practices to create more diverse ways for the campus community to get more information about disability and offer a campus-wide support system for those with any disability.”

According to the findings of Hutcheon and Wolbring’s (2012) study, it was discovered that there is a continued need for critical examination of higher education policy to address those students with different abilities (p.39). Furthermore, these authors indicated that there is still a lack of support in finances, accommodations, and faculty and peer awareness (p.39). Students with ASD experiencing these effects could be problematic for their educational journey as they develop their own philosophies, self-concept, and individuality according to Kraus (2008; Hutcheon and Wolbring, 2012). The implementation of disability policy has affected the impact of underrepresented students’ health such as those students with ASD and their future opportunities (Hutcheon and Wolbring, 2012; Jung, 2001).

Overview of Disability Services in Higher Education

Madaus et al. (2011) noted that support services for students with different abilities have become a more distinct area of practice in higher education (p.133). Following the enactment signed by President Lincoln for the “Deaf and Dumb” as it was titled, the National Deaf-Mute College enrolled its first student in the fall of 1864 (Madaus, 2011). Madaus (2011) also noted that following the enrollment of this student, over twenty-five deaf and mute students were enrolled and were the first graduating class of the National Deaf-Mute College. Madaus (2011) then stated that following the first graduating class of 1869, “the graduation of the first bachelors of arts in a college for the deaf-mutes, from what could be justly claimed to be a regular collegiate course of study, excited unusual interest in the educational world” (p.5).

The American Council on Education later performed a study after World War I on veterans who had become amputees while serving in World War I (Madaus, 2011). From this study, it was discovered that many of those veterans were provided with common accommodations such as transportation services, note-takers for classes for those who were also visually impaired, and ramps into buildings in higher education settings (p.7). Madaus (2011) also cited that disability services in the post-secondary setting primarily consist of several components including “professional and program standards, a code of ethics, and a disability service specific professional organization” (p.133). According to Madaus (2011), these types of programs began to emerge in the United States after 1944 and developed more after World War II, citing Rusalem (1962) who noted:

Physically handicapped college students requiring one or more special education services are no longer a rarity on the American campus. Having the same goals as other students, they are enrolling in increasing numbers, encouraged by better public and private school

preparation, improved rehabilitation services, the availability of scholarship funds, and a changing attitude toward disabled persons in our society. Since these sources of encouragement will probably become more influential in the future, it seems likely that the problems of educating the physically handicapped student will be receiving increasing attention (p.8).

Following the 1962 prediction of Rusalem, decades had gone by where enactments such as the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA) addressed issues that were limiting and cited in the ADA. The population of students with learning disabilities had continued to grow and new demands were placed on higher education institutions to implement accommodations for a variety of students with different abilities (Madaus, 2011). As enrollment increased for students with different abilities, this caused higher education institutions to develop specific departments on their campuses to accommodate students as needed or as requested (Madaus, 2011). The training and development for disability service professionals have been improved to provide a more valuable means to resources to service those with different abilities (Madaus, 2011). With significant growth in enrollment for students with disabilities entering higher education (Pinder-Amaker, 2014), it is important for university administrators and their staff to understand how to provide inclusive opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities such as ASD.

Although a growing number of higher education institutions are developing programs for students on the autism spectrum, more efforts to support this population of college students are needed to better understand how to inclusively accommodate these students both academically and socially. Primary and secondary school systems have established specific environments to accommodate students with ASD, along with Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) and Response

to Intervention (RTI) programs to ensure that students with disabilities such as ASD receive the most effective teaching methods. A review of the literature revealed secondary schools are mandated to identify students with disabilities, whereas universities are not required to identify students with ASD; however, students with ASD can obtain accommodations that provide disability support (Hillman, 2019). The literature uncovered a gap by not disclosing adequate research on the perspectives of university administration and staff regarding the transition of undergraduate students from secondary school to higher education. Moreover, the literature identified gaps in the identification of students who readily find reputable college programs that are accommodating for students with intellectual disabilities (Berg, et al., 2017; Wright, et al., 2017).

This literature review assisted in the process of implementation evaluation by helping me to understand how a student with ASD develops in an inclusive college environment and if higher education administrators intervene according to their policies to assure the learning environment is inclusive for students with ASD. Students on the autism spectrum do not experience the same luxuries as students without ASD, and they are not as sought out by school enrollment officers as general education students who do not need additional academic assistance (Ralph & Boxall, 2015). The reviewed literature helped frame this study to better grasp how disability and inclusion policies are developed and implemented at a university in the mid-South.

Transition Plan Development

With ASD student enrollment increasing year by year (see Figure 1), a seamless transition may take place from the secondary classroom to the postsecondary environment. Moreover, the ASD student population could be positively impacted by the development and implementation of the policies that are supposed to support them in their educational journey.

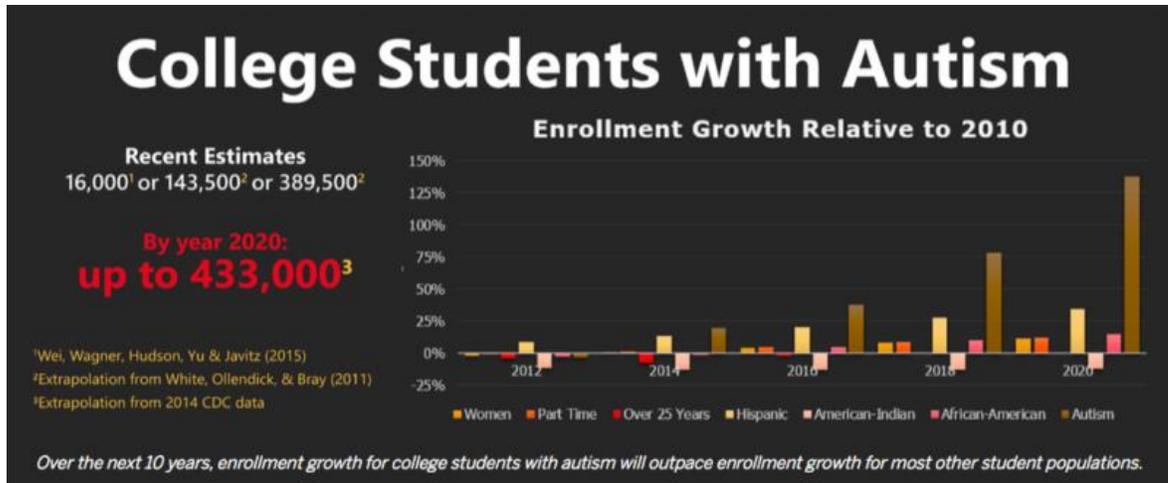
According to Bakker et al. (2019) regarding the increase of students with ASD on college campuses, these authors cited:

From 2010 to 2016, the proportion of students with ASD significantly increased from 0.20% to 0.45%. The characteristics of ASD students at enrollment were similar to other students, but it took ASD students more time to reach higher education compared to no recorded disabilities (ND) students, and they were at heightened risk of comorbidity compared to other disabilities (OD) students. No difficulties were found with participation in preparatory activities, and goal setting (p.1).

The stresses, however, of transitioning from high school to college is quite stressful for students with ASD (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). Glennon and Marks (2010) noted that students with ASD “have difficulty making transitions and changes and adapting to situations that are unfamiliar or different” (p. 1). Some argued that academic support departments should provide academic and social support to students with ASD (Glennon & Marks, 2010). In addition, parents and college professionals experienced stress when attempting to assure inclusion on college campuses (Glennon & Marks, 2010). For example, parents and college professionals are often concerned about how things non-ASD students may be accustomed to—such as fire drills late at night or making friends—can be the most difficult for students with ASD (see Appendix A).

Figure 1

Enrollment Growth Relative to 2010



Note. From “Fast Fact #1: 1 in 68 or 1 in 225?” by College Autism Network, 2017a.

<https://collegeautismnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Fast-Fact-3-12-11.pdf>.

Students with ASD may require more ongoing support with their college transition; these students should have plans that include precise development in “career exploration, academic goal setting, and preparation, assessing and knowing learning styles, self-advocacy skills, reasonable accommodations, academic supports, interagency collaboration, technology, and time management skills” (Roberts, 2010, p. 158). VanBergeijk et al. (2008) noted that although interventions such as written educational plans may have been provided for students with ASD, these students still need support regarding independent living and other social, vocational, and counseling needs. VanBergeijk et al. also posited that “with a carefully planned transition, appropriate accommodations, and support, ASD students can be successful academically and socially in college” (p. 1359).

Creating the Transition for Students with ASD

Students with ASD can take certain steps when moving from the secondary to the postsecondary environment. Szidon et al. (2015) identified these steps:

- Identify the transition goals linking postsecondary goals with the goals noted in a previous educational plan at their former high school,
- Troubleshoot and adjust transition and former educational plan goals, and
- Provide opportunities to teach skills, and finally, evaluate the progress. (p. 148)

Szidon et al. posited that teachers and parents should identify a clear connection between the students' secondary and postsecondary goals. Furthermore, it is vitally important to (a) identify the necessary supports for students with ASD when planning their transition goals and (b) determine the needs for each goal.

College Faculty Versus Secondary Processes for ASD Student Transition

Pena and Kocur (2013) noted that parents of students with ASD play at least two significant roles in assisting with their child's transition from secondary to postsecondary schools. These roles include, but are not limited to:

- coaching students to navigate campus services,
- encouraging students to participate in college more independently,
- navigating the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and
- finding supportive faculty.

The American Psychiatric Association (2013) characterized an individual with ASD as one who may “[have] difficulties with social communication skills, and a pattern of restricted or repetitive behavior, interests, or activities” (p.1). Bearing this in mind, the transition from secondary to higher education environments for students with ASD does not involve the same

processes; for example, students with ASD typically do not participate in events that include administrators, teachers, and parents in the same room. Historically, it has not been standard practice to transition or orient students with ASD to the overall college setting (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009). Practice strategies for generally supporting students with ASD in their first-year experience are lacking.

Preparing students with ASD for careers and life beyond their academics can be challenging because there is limited information on the outcomes for adults with ASD, including those who attend college (Anderson & Butt, 2017). Further, it is unclear what social, executive functioning, and mental health issues were addressed before the enrollment of students with ASD. According to Anderson and Butt (2017), students with ASD are concerned with having an equitable education and with their non-academic issues. Furthermore, scholars have presented concerns about the labor market and students with ASD. Alverson et al. (2019) noted that students with ASD ponder their employability because youth with disabilities are less likely to complete their postsecondary education at the same rates as their peers without disabilities. Alverson et al. noted that college students with ASD experience the same academic and social challenges that they faced in high school. Students with ASD are often concerned about their ability to function after receiving a postsecondary education; thus, college students with ASD need better support from their college administrators and teachers (Alverson et al., 2019).

Recruitment: Increasing College Enrollment for Students on the Autism Spectrum

The brochures or websites that offer information for a school are usually the “face” of the institution and set the tone for what the campus represents. Advertising messages influence how future students believe the college or university will support them through their degree completion efforts (Ralph & Boxall, 2015). The promotional tactics to gain the interest of

potential future students are well-planned and draw the attention of both general education students and students with ASD. Many school advertisements grab the attention of students with disabilities through advertisements that include wording such as “despite your disability.” This wording can appear encouraging to some students and offensive to others because these types of statements may imply that people with disabilities are not capable of being successful (Ralph & Boxall, 2015). Moreover, basic public relations practices explained that an institution’s administrators should know their audiences and focus their messages accordingly (Ralph & Boxall, 2015).

Ralph and Boxall (2015) argued that recruitment was an issue that cannot be ignored in discussions of learning and teaching because recruitment is a vital aspect of higher education. Without students, there would be no learning, teaching, or curriculum. Therefore, universities and colleges that fail to recruit students with disabilities miss out on the significance of being diverse and the valuable contributions that students with ASD could provide (Ralph & Boxall, 2015). According to Gabel et al. (2016), the term people with disabilities is inclusive of all racial, ethnic, and cultural categories. Gabel et al.’s study data indicated that 10.9% of students in postsecondary education are disabled. Therefore, institutions of higher education have a stake in recruiting and meeting the needs of students across multiple categories, including people with intellectual disabilities.

Taylor-Talley (2018) studied dyslexia, a learning disability that hinders a person’s ability to process elements of reading and writing. Taylor-Talley found that younger students with dyslexia often receive some sort of corrective education and accommodations. However, Taylor-Talley also found that, in many cases, dyslexic college students may not receive assistance and accommodations targeted to their individual and special needs. Hadley (2018) noted that the

number of students with ASD who transitioned to college and universities continues to rise, and college and university administrators place special efforts on acknowledging the importance of these students' "developing purpose" (p.421) while on college campuses and provide accommodations to promote growth and development as a result. Kimball et al. (2017) stipulated that students become effectively engaged in the recruitment process because the college and university administration and recruitment staff understand (a) the connections between students' disabilities, (b) the ways students might interact with the world, and (c) how to provide suitable accommodations. Moreover, many researchers believe that students in supportive environments who engage in a wide range of demonstrably beneficial academic and nonacademic behaviors will experience success at higher rates than they might otherwise (Kuh et al., 2005; Kuh, 2007, as cited in Kimball et al., 2017).

College and university recruiters' marketing efforts should include inspiration-based wording that does not come off as insulting or making special allowances for students with ASD because these students do not want to be singled out as disabled (Black et al., 2015). Further, students should understand from the advertisements that the teaching strategies in the college or university environments will be conducive to the learning of students with disabilities on college campuses (Black et al., 2015). It is also important for college campuses to provide equal on-campus opportunities for students regardless of their abilities without highlighting their disabilities. Awareness of disabilities such as ASD could be raised, but students with ASD should have access to the opportunities available for any student who wants to participate in activities outside of the classroom (Black et al., 2015). Hughes et al. (2016) identified various ways college and university students receive on and off-campus accommodations and discussed the various factors that must be addressed for students with disabilities of any kind. Hughes et al.

(2016) also noted that the traditional means used to accommodate students with disabilities are outdated and must be upgraded so that students with cognitive, physical, or any like disabilities could be engaged on their college campuses while being successful until the end of their degree program.

Students with disabilities enter higher education environments in many ways, which can be beneficial to students and educators alike (Bolt, 2017). Some students with disabilities may find it possible to excel in the secondary classroom environment but transitioning into the college classroom from the K–12 classroom may affect their academic and social abilities (Bolt, 2017). Some schools offer and advertise their wealth of student resources, whereas other schools offer little detail about special resources and accommodations, or even advertise what resources are readily available and equitable for the inclusion of students with disabilities (Dong & Lucas, 2016). Both the students and the administration progress when higher education officials support students (Dong & Lucas, 2016). Thus, when students perform better academically, the administrators can use that data to discuss further implications for the improvement of inclusion practices with other community colleges and universities.

McLeod et al. (2019) noted that students with ASD experienced “significantly worse outcomes than neurotypical students on academic performance, social relationships and bullying, and physical and mental health” (p. 2320). McLeod et al. also posited that the challenges faced by students with ASD resulted in the stigma and social rejection associated with the disability itself rather than just the defined attributes of ASD. Additionally, Jackson et al. (2018) indicated that postsecondary students with ASD struggle more than their non-ASD peers with “higher rates of loneliness, anxiety, depression and an increased incidence of dropping out before completion of their degrees” (p. 643). Institutions of higher education that are admitting students with ASD

should foster support for these students and their individual and unique needs. Longtin (2014) discussed the lack of support for students with ASD in higher education institutions:

Currently, only a handful of colleges and universities have developed specialized programs to support students on the autism spectrum. Often costly, such programs add thousands of dollars in fees above and beyond escalating tuition costs. Consequently, it is not surprising that most of the specialized autism support programs reside in private rather than public institutions. (p. 63)

The literature did not emphasize the recruitment processes or supports for college students with ASD. Moreover, little attention was paid to intervention efforts following the recruitment of students with ASD despite the rapid increase in enrollment among this population (White et al., 2016). White et al. explained that college students with ASD struggle with “interpersonal competence, managing competing demands in postsecondary education, and poor regulation” (p. 29). White et al. also found that about 41% of students with ASD graduate from college with a 4-year degree. According to White et al.,

Programming to support a smooth transition from high school to postsecondary education may prove critical in helping students succeed in the postsecondary environment, as well as preventing a host of adverse outcomes (i.e., skill loss, symptom exacerbation, and poor quality of life, in adulthood). Transition to postsecondary education typically occurs during late adolescence and early adulthood, a developmental period of heightened risk for people with ASD. (p. 29)

Table 1 displays White et al.’s study data, including the identified needs of college students with ASD.

Table 1*Primary Needs Identified by Needs Analysis Across Online Surveys and Focus Groups*

Overarching construct	Specific facets
Social integration	Navigating social interactions Finding social support Handling conflict with others
Self-determination	Finding transition services Self-advocacy Time management Sustaining or developing social motivation Goal attainment Self-awareness and knowledge Independent living skills
Self-regulation	Managing social, daily living, and social concerns Navigating inconsistencies and changes in routine Executive functioning (e.g., managing inattention) Coping with academic stress

Note. Adapted from “Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in College: Results From a Preliminary Mixed Methods Needs Analysis,” by S. W. White, R. Elias, C. Salinas, C. E. Capriola, N. Capriola, C. Conner, S. B. Asselin, Y. Miyazaki, C. A. Mazefsky, P. Howling, and E. E. Getzel, 2016, *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 56, 29–40. (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2016.05.010>).

Autistic Acceptance and Neurodiversity

An autistic, Australian sociologist, Judy Singer, coined the term *neurodiversity* in 1998 to identify ASD as not being a disability; instead, Singer contended that people with autism should be viewed as people whose brains simply work differently than the average human being (Ortega, 2009). The development of neurodiversity has been primarily governed by those in the ASD population because individuals with ASD believe that their specificity should be respected just as any other group of people (Ortega, 2009). Furthermore, the term neurodiversity addressed the importance of (a) those without ASD becoming more aware of their peers with ASD by recognizing and respecting their cognitive differences and (b) the ASD population being accepted and accommodated instead of being treated (Silberman, 2015).

Regarding the concept of neurodiversity on the college campus, administrators maintain the responsibility to assure academic equity and inclusion amongst students with ASD as enrollment increases and the public, including the media, has become more aware of ASD. There is a paucity of quantitative studies regarding the expansion and supports for students with ASD on U.S. college campuses (Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008). Robertson and Ne'eman (2008) explained that students with ASD require support systems for academic and nonacademic areas throughout their college experiences. Moreover, Robertson and Ne'eman noted that

Adoption of specific services, accommodations, and support resources for autistic college students largely depend on their individual strengths, challenges, preferences, and needs because a large variation exists among autistic people; this variation is representative of the large number of differences seen across diverse population groups in society.

However, several common challenges often present major obstacles for autistic people pursuing their college studies. (p. 14)

To cultivate an environment for college students with ASD, administrators must focus on diversity and inclusion practices that engage students with ASD in neurodiverse populations and/or groups (Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008). Robertson and Ne'eman (2008) recommended training student-run community organizations on how to work with students with ASD as well as developing instructional programs to educate students about the ASD community. Coghill and Coghill (2014) also suggested Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as an approach for ASD learners in the college classroom because the UDL approach implements inclusion and identifies potential barriers to faculty development.

The Dialogic Experience and Shift in Classroom Paradigm

To signify their sense of freedom or self-identity, students must be able to speak in the academic setting without feeling as if they have no place in the classroom. Practicing inclusion in the college classroom and identifying students with ASD who may think differently than their non-ASD peers chart a path that could remove the stigma surrounding ASD. Instead of just stating talking points in the classroom, students with ASD could have the opportunity to lead conversations about their own lived experiences and share ideas that gravitate around their values and beliefs.

The Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) developed and distributed multiple standards and statistics that disability service providers could use on college campuses (Brown, 2017). Furthermore, evaluation tools for disability service departments have been made readily available to assist in recognizing achievements made by students with disabilities (Brown, 2017). Brown (2017) also collected substantive evidence that both researchers and university administrators were concerned about evaluating the value of programs designed for students with disabilities; however, minimal efforts to include the various meanings of disability were not visible in higher education campus documents.

Equity in ASD and non-ASD recruitment

Populations of students are diversifying rapidly on college campuses (Mercer-Mapstone & Bovill, 2020); however, it was found that there are limits in engagement and inclusion for students with ASD and their non-ASD peers. Brown et al. (2020) suggested that students with ASD be embraced as partners instead of students. Brown et al. (2020) noted that: “Instead of primarily treating disabled students as lacking capacities and requiring programmatic

intervention to succeed in the university, a partnership approach validates and draws on disabled students' specific expertise and experience to make institutional change" (p. 97).

It is important to consider students with ASD who may struggle with their identity on college campuses (Bindra et al., 2018). To avoid perpetuating stigma and a sense of inequity surrounding students with ASD, college administrators must recognize the value of equity in students who may require special accommodations and struggle to balance their academic responsibilities. Bindra et al. (2018) further aligned with Brown et al. (2020) who noted how viewing students with ASD as partners instead of students could produce higher academic achievement and adequate support from multiple college campus departments.

The Benefits of ASD Student Recruitment and Enrollment

College environments and students with ASD benefit from these students' enrollment in postsecondary programs (Van Hees et al., 2015). Although students with ASD may face social challenges, navigating college life can also help these students develop social skills (Van Hees et al., 2015). Moreover, Accardo et al. (2019) noted that students with ASD benefit from extended time on exams and receiving counseling and faculty mentorship. Additionally, administrators, disability services staff, and faculty could benefit by having more experience in accommodating students with ASD and learning more about how to identify and meet these students' needs by providing non-academic academic supports.

Inclusion for Undergraduate Students with ASD

Students must feel as if they are a part of a college environment to succeed in academics and their social lives. When a student is disabled, the position of inclusiveness could be a bit more challenging to accomplish (Fossey et al., 2017). Some students with ASD may participate in fewer extracurricular activities, such as campus clubs or similar events, than some general

education students who may not have a disability (Marr, 2015). Some students with ASD lack social inclusiveness, which could stem from not having adequate access to academic and physical requirements to maintain their status as college students (Marr, 2015). It is important to understand why students on the autism spectrum tend to drop out of university and feel excluded around their peers who may not suffer from the same types of disabilities (Marr, 2015).

According to Qian et al. (2018), academic challenges are one of the major barriers to college degree completion among students with intellectual disabilities. Qian et al. (2018) also noted that 80% of the student participants in their study reported that academic support was the most important identified need. In their study, Qian et al. (2018) used a student success coaching model to support the academic success and social inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities. The student participants reported that the student success coaches helped them prepare for classes by teaching them effective study habits and helping them understand faculty expectations regarding course requirements (Qian et al., 2018). Fossey et al. (2017) claimed that if administrators made reasonable adjustments on college campuses, the retention rates could increase. In addition, implementing support for disabilities could serve as a welcoming factor for this population of students.

The same welcoming tactics used on college campuses for entering freshmen should be available for students who may require more accommodations. Marr (2015) noted that college administrators should frame the campus community for students who identify as having an impairment so that these students feel more welcomed and included in the campus community. Marr (2015) also found in his study that many of the university advisors interviewed had expressed limited knowledge about the courses some students should take, whereas other advisors seemed unresponsive to the needs of the students. Many of the students in the study

struggled because they wanted to be autonomous in their quest through the degree process yet found it more difficult to navigate the process when they could not get assistance from administrators (Marr, 2015). Students in the study expressed feeling stigmatized by the administrators and blamed themselves for the lack of support, which led to lowered self-confidence and disinterestedness (Marr, 2015).

The United States has laws in place to protect the interests and rights of students with disabilities, yet these laws may not be enough to deter potential neglect (Gibson, 2015). Gibson (2015) asserted requirements outside of IDEA should be in place to accommodate students with ASD. Hall and Tinklin (1998) noted that public officials and college administrators have certain obligations in the development of nonacademic adaptations and accommodations that students with ASD could use to become successful college students. Further, Arcus (2010) suggested that college administrators use a UDL as an instructional approach to provide better accommodations for students with disabilities while enhancing the learning environment for all students.

Sachs's (2011) study data showed that the academic achievement of students with disabilities was almost as high as general education students; however, the special and general education students differed regarding their experiences, as did students with various disabilities among themselves. These data indicated that students with disabilities spent more of their time working to meet the demands of their course load, partook in fewer social and extra-curricular activities, and accessed computers and information technology less frequently (Sachs, 2011). Inclusion continues to be a problem for many students, and colleges and universities must work to (a) reduce the gap in the social inclusion of students with disabilities and (b) adjust academic standards and curriculums to meet their needs.

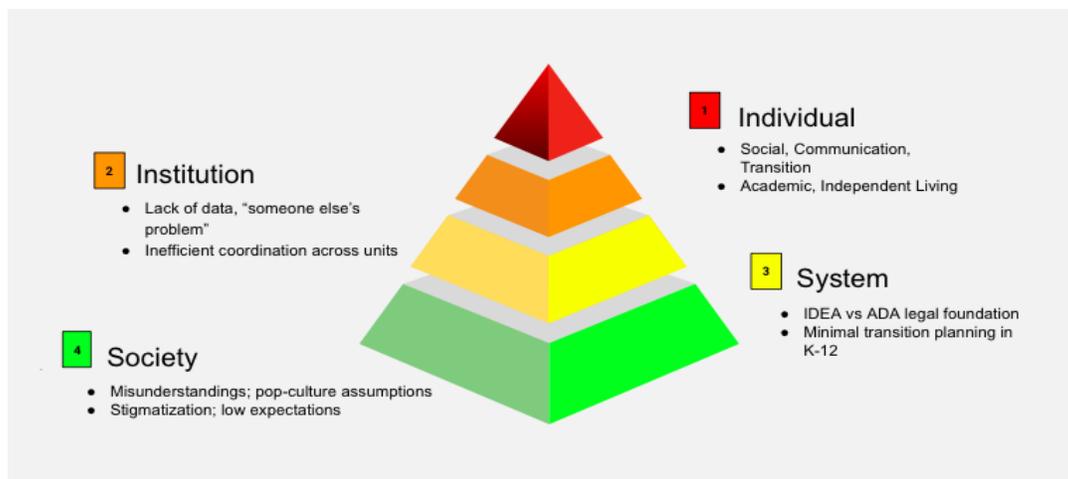
Pinder-Amaker (2014) noted that psychiatric risks coupled with the stresses of life could present unexpected challenges for students with ASD. Pinder-Amaker (2014) also stated that enrollment of students with ASD will continue to grow; however, students with ASD still have unmet needs on college campuses. Statistically,

The proportion of children diagnosed with ASD in the United States has increased from 1 in 150 in the year 2000, to 1 in 88 in 2008 . . . Most children identified as having ASDs were not intellectually disabled (defined as having IQ scores lower than 70). The factors contributing to the increased prevalence of ASD include heightened public awareness, improved screening, changes in the diagnostic specification, and, notably, improved ability to recognize and diagnose higher-functioning individuals with ASD who may have been overlooked in the past. (Pinder-Amaker, 2014, p.125)

Pinder-Amaker's (2014) study findings implied that college coursework may not be a challenge for students with ASD, but the unmet needs of inclusiveness or "an array of psychosocial challenges" (p. 125) may be challenging. Facilitating a seamless transition from high school to college should be integrated into the policy development for students with ASD because students with ASD could have a college experience that results in opportunities for substantial academic outcomes (Pinder-Amaker, 2014). Figure 2 below defines categorically how an individual with ASD faces various challenges in society and the "spectrum condition" that affects ASD individuals at different levels.

Figure 2

Challenges Faced by ASD Students



Note. From “Fast Fact #3: Beyond the Label of Autism Spectrum Disorder,” by College Autism Network, 2017b. (<https://collegeautismnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Fast-Fact-3-12-11.pdf>).

Primary Challenges for Students with ASD

Understanding the needs of students with ASD can be challenging for administrators as they attempt to draft policies to accommodate this population. Social interaction training and independent living training are services requested by parents of students with ASD (Elias & White, 2018) because these students have been challenged with “self-advocacy, managing emotions, and managing personal/adaptive skills relative to postsecondary students with ADHD” (Elias & White, 2018, p. 732). Furthermore, the need for academic support among students with ASD is growing; however, college administrators have not taken steps to address this need (White et al., 2016). White et al. (2016) noted that limited interpersonal competence is a central challenge for secondary or postsecondary students with ASD. White et al. also noted that students with ASD also struggle to manage competing demands and poor emotional regulation.

Lastly, school personnel has cited greater self-advocacy as a primary student need (White et al., 2016).

Inclusion Effectiveness - Socialization, not Isolation.

Pugliese and White (2014) noted that students with ASD may find it difficult to navigate through college life despite being academically capable. Although ASD is a complicated disability, students with ASD are more successful when faculty understand this disability (Reagan, 2012). However, though there is training for administrators and staff members alike to learn more about ASD, the training is not readily available at all colleges across the United States (Reagan, 2012).

To avoid isolation in and outside of the classroom, inclusion coordinators should incorporate attitude and collaboration to assist students with ASD (Eldar et al., 2010). Kuder and Accardo (2018) explained that:

Social skills difficulties are one of the core diagnostic features of individuals with ASD. Difficulties with social skills can not only affect social relationships but impact academic success, as students with ASD may have difficulty asking questions, participating in discussions, and collaborating with peers in groups. (p. 722)

Although colleges have designed departments to assist students with ASD with accommodations and other supports, these resources may not meet the cognitive, social, or academic needs of the student. Students with ASD are academically qualified (Kuder & Accardo, 2018); however, these students still face challenges. Van Hees et al. (2015) identified five challenges that students with ASD face:

1. Struggling with new situations and unexpected changes: Students reported difficulty in handling a large amount of new information and choices in college as well as difficulty with the lack of structure and predictability.
2. Exhausting but necessary social contacts: Students reported that they realized how important social contacts were but had difficulty making social contacts and participating in group projects in class.
3. Processing information and time management: Students reported difficulty with time management and experiencing sensory overload.
4. Doubts about disclosure: Students expressed concerns about how others would understand their ASD and whether they should disclose their disability to the university disability services office.
5. Mental health issues: Students described feelings of being overwhelmed, anxious, and depressed that impacted all aspects of their life (p.1673).

Literature regarding the development of accommodating supports to meet the needs of students with ASD appeared to be deficient. Governing officials on college campuses must understand these challenges to help students with ASD successfully navigate college life and feel included and not isolated (Kuder & Accardo, 2018).

Curriculum Design for Students with ASD

Differentiated instruction is more of a priority in the K–12 classroom; college and university professors normally prepare their lessons and supplemental instruction tools with the general education student in mind (Wright, 2017). In many university environments, students with ASD who require special accommodations must get assistance from an ASD department administrator, and the administrator will reach out to the professor to best accommodate the

students (Wright, 2017). This method resulted in gaps in the identification of students who readily find reputable college programs that are accommodating for students with intellectual disabilities (Berg et al., 2017; Wright, 2017). The number of students with ASD seeking postsecondary education have increased (Berg et al., 2017); however, expectations continue to exist in the corporate world regardless of what prerequisites are set in place to prepare students with ASD for the workforce. Pinder-Amaker (2014) noted that many students with ASD experience increased stress as they attempt to navigate unpredictable college campus environments. Further, the stressors associated with their disabilities make degree completion and advancement to the workforce more difficult. Agran and Wehmeyer (2000) used the self-determined learning model of instruction (SDLMI) as a curriculum to teach students to set goals, act on those goals, and adjust goals and plans as needed. According to Agran and Wehmeyer, 89% of the student participants in the study who were diagnosed with intellectual disabilities improved their performance of target behaviors after receiving instruction using the SDLMI.

Educators should consider using a UDL to show some form of equity between students with ASD and non-ASD students (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Though it has been proven that students with ASD struggle with the transition from secondary to postsecondary education, college campus administrators and staff rarely assist students with ASD with social skills and self-advocacy (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017). Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2017) studied students with ASD who were transitioning to college and noted that limited interventions were provided for these students; therefore, it was difficult to determine if educational equity or inclusiveness was apparent on the college campus. Gillespie-Lynch et al. also noted that research on college students with ASD was limited; however, multiple studies concurred that there was a need for

support in three realms: “social skills, self-advocacy, and executive functioning/self-regulation” (p. 3).

McKeon et al. (2013) presented suggested guidelines for curriculum design relating to students with ASD. With such an increase in ASD student enrollment, McKeon et al. explained the challenges faced by professors regarding curriculum design and accessibility. McKeon et al. noted the amendments made in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which presented models to promote inclusion on the postsecondary level and cultivate the full involvement of students with disabilities. McKeon et al. (2013) also noted that awareness regarding ASD student learning differences and faculty engagement is lacking. Lastly, McKeon et al. discussed the substantial gaps in current knowledge regarding how to support students with ASD in their postsecondary education.

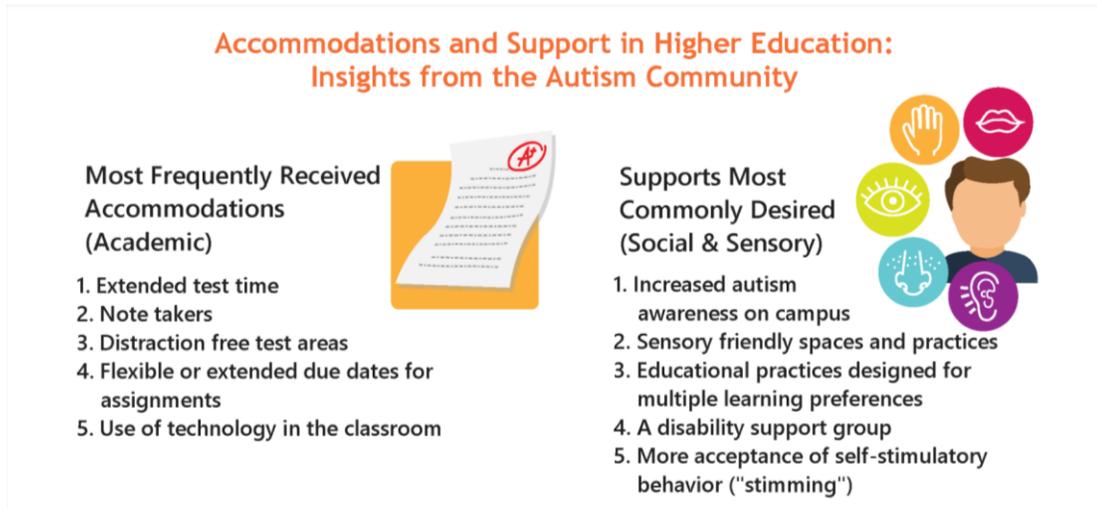
Accommodations and Classroom Support

Kreider et al. (2015) viewed students with ASD from a holistic point of view, thus allowing rehabilitation officers and higher education administrators to create a research-intensive partnership to discover best practices for autistic students on college campuses. Kreider et al. (2015) also noted the importance of securing the appropriate support from rehabilitation professionals when guiding students transitioning from the postsecondary educational environment. Considering the barriers that are currently identified, students with ASD may need more help navigating the college environment than general education students (López Gavira & Moriña, 2015). López Gavira and Moriña (2015) noted barriers related to identifiable supports for students with disabilities in general. Moreover, when the social model for students with disabilities was analyzed, López Gavira and Moriña found that learning is hindered when universities failed to commit to measures to ensure the elimination of barriers that would impede

one's growth and success in a new environment. Figure 3 below displays the accommodation and supports in higher education provided by the College Autism Network.

Figure 3

Accommodations and Support in Higher Education: Insights from the Autism Community



Note. From “Accommodations and Support in Higher Education: Insights from The Autism Community,” by College Autism Network, 2018. (<https://collegeautismnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/CAN-Fast-Fact-7-2018-07-02.pdf>).

Many students with disabilities experience great despair in the school setting due to unforeseen barriers (Clouder et al., 2016). Clouder et al. (2016) suggested that school administrators implement new guidelines and guidance for students with ASD and investigate approaches to adopt health and social care disciplines for students on the autism spectrum to reduce such barriers. In their study regarding university inclusion and accessibility, Moriña and Morgado (2018) found architectural barriers related to students with hidden disabilities on college campuses. Students struggling with disabilities may experience urban, transportation, environmental, and communication barriers on college campuses that administrators may not

consider as hindrances (Moriña & Morgado, 2018). Furthermore, Moriña and Morgado noted the ongoing need for students on the autism spectrum to receive support for adaptation and readjustment on college campuses.

Students transitioning from high school into the workforce or higher education must be proactive in planning their next steps (Lovett et al., 2015). AHEAD supports students with disabilities in higher education by assuring these students are legally provided with the necessary accommodations on college campuses when planning for academic success (Lovett et al., 2015). Furthermore, when adult students (special or general education) find themselves seeking independence from parents or guardians, higher education administrators must be conscious of the process and value the students' efforts while making accommodating allowances for those students dealing with cognitive, physical, psychiatric, and learning disabilities (Lovett et al., 2015). In addition, education administrators must accommodate students with disabilities who are also from minority groups (Morgado Camacho et al., 2017). Morgado Camacho et al. (2017) noted that the results from a study conducted in Spain showed that Spanish students with disabilities desired greater accommodations in and outside the classroom environment because administrators were unable to recognize these students' needs. These students noted that the ideal classroom environment would consist of policies and practices that include technological resources and a classroom design that is accessible to all students (Morgado Camacho et al., 2017). Although these requests exceed some of the ADA compliance policies, students sought accommodations that they can access on and off campuses (Morgado Camacho et al., 2017).

Like most humans, people with disabilities want to feel welcomed and accommodated in every place they may go. Policymakers have set policies in place for all educational institutions to ensure that students who may be declared as disabled in any form receive accommodations;

however, there is still a great need for improvement when it comes to supporting students with ASD on college campuses. Pinder-Amaker (2014) noted that, “the transition to college may also be exacerbated by dysregulation in visual, tactile, auditory, or other sensory modalities, difficulty processing or remembering oral instructions, fine-motor impairment, unusual movements or clumsiness, and emotional dysregulation” (p. 126.). According to Vaccaro et al. (2015), college and university students experienced so many unknown factors as they transition through the degree completion stages. Moreover, little is known about the first-year experiences of students with disabilities and how their feeling of belonging on the campus was developed.

In their study of postsecondary students on the autism spectrum, Cai and Richdale (2016) reported that administrators’ planning to prepare these students for a college education was insufficient and that the needs of students on the spectrum were not as important as the needs of students without disabilities. Regardless of whether a student has a disability or not, many college students have busy lifestyles with extraordinarily little time to balance their personal and academic lives (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Many schools supply wellness trainers for healthy lifestyles on college campuses along with learning access programs, services for counseling, and assistive technology centers, all of which are beneficial for general education students and students with disabilities (McCall, 2015; Pinder-Amaker, 2014; Vaccaro et al., 2015).

More progress is needed as it relates to affording students with intellectual disabilities an equitable education on college campuses. According to Hadley and Archer (2006), a postsecondary education is thought to prepare an individual for the workforce in whichever field the student chooses to study. However, when discussing college students with intellectual disabilities, jobs can be limited. Hadley and Archer (2006) and Sachs (2011) noted that many students with learning disabilities may be less prepared for college work than students without

learning disabilities and more academic supports would help provide equal opportunities when students with ASD enter the workforce.

Unaccommodating Accommodations

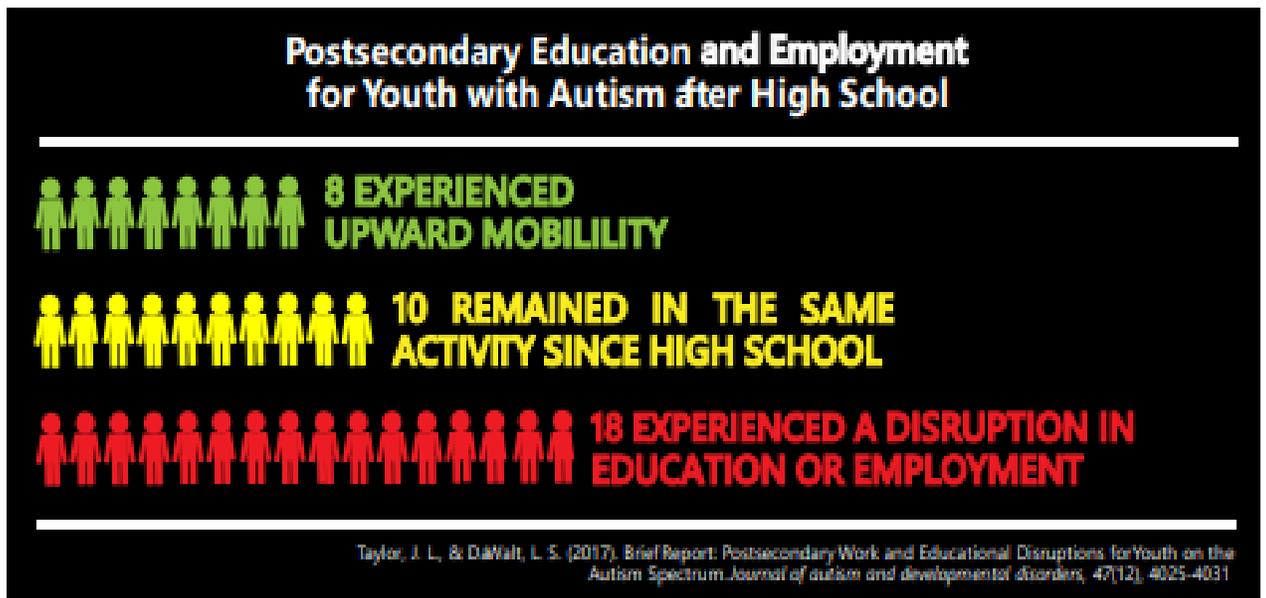
It is likely that more individuals will enroll in college over the next decade (Kuder & Accardo, 2018). The difference between students with ASD and those with physical disabilities is that administrators may not find it as difficult to accommodate students with physical disabilities that can visibly be noticed; however, many students with both visible and invisible disabilities have extensive needs that require effective accommodations and supports (Kuder & Accardo, 2018). In Anderson et al.'s (2019) study of support services in colleges and universities, 45 colleges and universities implied that they offered specialized services for students with ASD, particularly for those with Asperger's Syndrome. However, of the 45 institutions, only 31 of offered support services that went beyond what was offered for any student on their campus with a disability. Weiss and Rohland (2015) discussed the potential to improve both social communication and executive functioning levels of students with ASD. Weiss and Rohland also noted that social support improvements for students with ASD has bettered ASD student retention in higher education settings.

ASD Students in the Workforce. Many people with intellectual disabilities value work as a significant part of their lives, and many of them want to enjoy the benefits and the participation in regular paid employment, regardless of the salary (Ellenkamp et al., 2016). Across countries, salaries are exceptionally low among people with intellectual disabilities despite legislation that aims to provide more equity; specifically, people with disabilities earn 9% to 40% less than employees without disabilities. Talapatra et al. (2019) noted that students with intellectual disabilities are less likely to gain employment experiences than their young adult

counterparts with other health impairments, such as speech and hearing impairments and learning disabilities (see Figure 4). According to Talapatra et al. (2019), students with intellectual disabilities are significantly different socially, historically, and culturally when compared to their peers with high-incidence disabilities (i.e., emotional disturbance, learning disability, speech and language, other health impairment).

Figure 4

Postsecondary Education and Employment for Youth with Autism after High School



Note. From “Fast Fact #6: Family Matters,” by College Autism Network, 2017c.

(<https://collegeautismnetwork.org/category/content/research/>).

Talapatra et al. (2019) further compared students with intellectual disabilities to their peers with high-incidence disabilities and found postsecondary enrollment (28.7% vs. 53%–66.9%), postschool employment (38.8% vs. 49.6%–67.3%), independent living (36.3% vs. 51.2%–64.9%), financial stability, and community engagement all lag among students with intellectual disabilities. These findings highlighted the need for transition services to serve as a

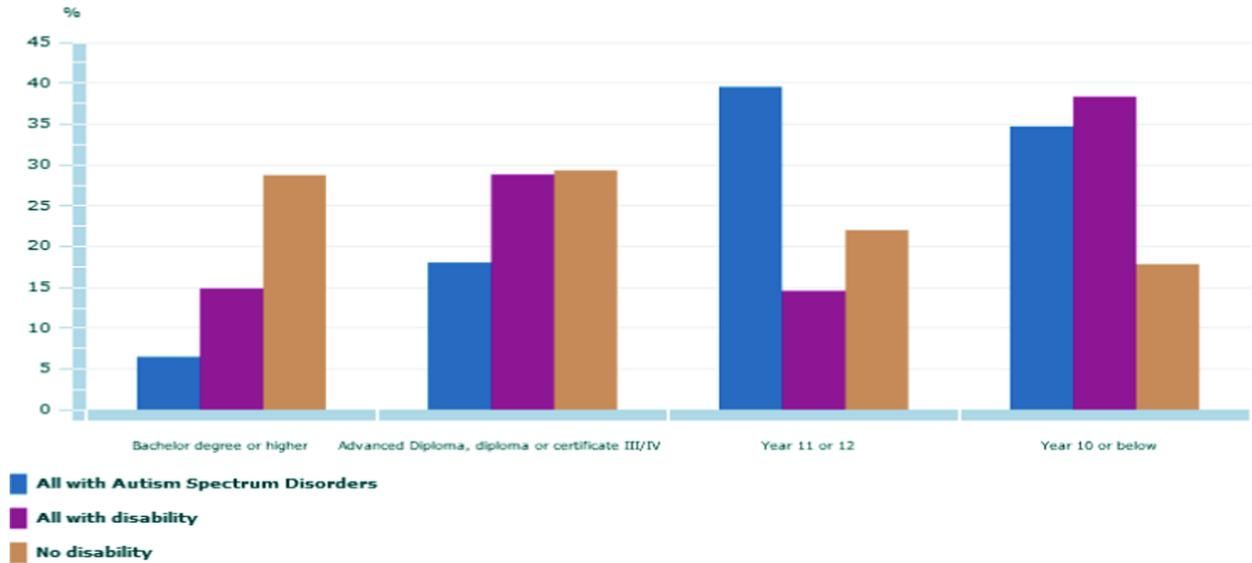
bridge for young adults with intellectual disabilities as they move from the K–12 educational system into the postsecondary education system and the adult workforce. Transitioning from the K–12 environment into the adult world was found to be difficult for students with ASD, and many young adults with disabilities will experience many degrees of inequality in both education and pay (Ellenkamp et al., 2016). In response to these inequalities, Ellenkamp et al. (2016) posed the question: ‘What work environment-related factors contribute to obtaining or maintaining work in competitive employment for people with an intellectual disability?’ Ellenkamp et al. concluded that regardless of laws, institutional accommodation, and policies to encourage the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in the paid workforce, research in this area is still extremely scarce. Ellenkamp et al. (2016) also examined literature about the workforce and people in the workforce with intellectual disabilities and found that over the past 20 years, very few studies have focused on work environment-related factors that can enhance competitive work and salaries for people with intellectual disabilities (Ellenkamp et al., 2016). In addition, Krzeminska and Hawse (2020) explained that:

People with autism have the highest rates of unemployment among any group of people with and without ‘disabilities.’ Yet their skills are essential to meeting current and future workforce needs, particularly in STEM areas. Traditionally defined as a disability, the strengths and limitations of autism are now recognized as valuable differences and increasingly harnessed by employers in the workplace. (p. 1)

Figure 5 presents Krzeminska and Hawse’s (2020) data cited from ABS (2017) that exhibits the levels of degrees for students in their study who had ASD, those who had disabilities other than ASD, and nondisabled students.

Figure 5

Highest level of education attained by people with autism, a disability, or no disability.



Note. From “Mainstreaming Neurodiversity for an Inclusive and Sustainable Future Workforce: Autism-Spectrum Employees,” by A. Krzeminska and S. Hawse, 2020, in L. Wood, L. Tan, Y. Breyer, and S. Hawse (Eds.), *Industry and higher education* (pp. 229–261). Springer. (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0874-5_11).

Removing Codependency of Secondary Education

Some perceive those students with ASD view secondary education as a safety net (Galler, 2013). Galler (2013) interviewed students with ASD, and many shared their concerns about being well prepared for a job or even getting a job. Galler (2013) also shared that some students with ASD were concerned that their ASD symptoms would worsen with age or if they would be accepted in the workforce by employers or their peers’ reactions if they were transparent about their different abilities. Similarly, White et al. (2016) studied job obtainment among students with ASD following graduation and noted that the students interviewed mentioned the

underemployment or unemployment of adults with ASD and how so few of these adults live independently.

Many higher education programs have assisted students with job search skills and provide services targeted to make students' transition into the workforce more effortless (Bat-Chava et al., 2002). In this study, I evaluated the policies that have been written and enacted for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) on the campus of a university in the Mid-South. Moreover, to gain a greater understanding of the topic and respond to the guiding research questions, I used Critical Disability Theory (CDT) as the theoretical framework which focused on disabilities, and the process evaluation research approach which focused on meaningful judgments.

Critical Disability Theory

CDT has surfaced over the years to assist researchers in analyzing disability issues that are relative to “cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon” (Hall, 2008, p. 1). This study evaluated educational equity and inclusive practices of administrators and staff for undergraduate students with ASD. CDT is engrained in a tradition of assumptions about disabilities that serve to oppress people with disabilities and invade their human rights (Gillies, 2014). Schalk (2017) further explained that CDT involves not examining the physical impairments of people with disabilities, but instead concentrating on the social norms that may identify specific attributes and social conditions that focus on the stigmatized features in particular populations.

Schalk (2017) explained how CDT can be used as a theoretical framework when not exclusively studying people with disabilities. Schalk explained that “One can study disabled people and not be doing critical disability studies and one can be doing critical disability studies

and not be directly studying disabled people” (p. 1). Rioux (1997) elaborated on CDT by discussing perceptions of disabilities and emphasizing how policy, programming, and implementation are reflective of those who attempt to execute these things for persons with disabilities. Rioux used CDT to help further identify an approach to reveal the underlying perceptions of what is functional as accommodations for those with disabilities.

For the sake of this study, I did not evaluate the policies and practices used for undergraduate students with ASD to identify if ableism is taking place; rather, as Dolmage (2017) suggested, I aimed to identify how the university is designed. Dolmage (2017) also noted that administrators who understand ASD will understand how the university can be modified in the future. Applying CDT and recognizing students with ASD embodying a political and cultural identity instead of a medical inability aid in the intervention of administrators redesigning their campuses with elements that are more accommodating (Dolmage, 2017). CDT outlined the social and political aspects for persons with disabilities and was used as a method to describe the lived experiences of persons with ASD in the sociopolitical environments (Hall, 2019). Hall (2019) further noted that to track or evaluate those with disabilities, CDT can refer to those efforts executed to transform the circumstances of those who may be deemed as disabled, whether the disability is hidden or physical. Additionally, Dolmage (2017) wrote that disablism declared that “there is nothing worse than being disabled and treats disabled people unfairly as a result of these values” (p. 7). Gillies (2014) further noted that: “disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and power(lessness), power over, and power to” (p. 1348).

Campbell (2009) argued that CDT is used to expose ableism. Ableism was defined by Bogart and Dunn (2019) as “stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression

toward people with disabilities” (p. 650). Bogart and Dunn also noted that people with disabilities are the “largest minority group in the United States” (p. 650). Brown and Leigh (2018) wrote about the morale on college campuses lowering while students with ASD have voiced the need for awareness, neurodiversity, and beneficial accommodations. Brown and Leigh (2018) explained that intellectual disabilities are becoming prominent in higher education, which increased burnout rates and stress-related issues amongst instructors and college leaders. Further, just as students without disabilities need resources to be academically successful, students with ASD should also be rightfully accommodated. According to Hall (2019), CDT challenges the normal assumptions about disability. Rather than solely focusing on the disability, CDT places focus on the intervention of social structures surrounding people with disabilities. Hall also believed that CDT:

Weave[s] disabled people back into the fabric of society . . . as full citizens whose rights and privileges are intact, whose history and contributions are recorded, and whose often-distorted representations in art, literature, film, theater, and other forms of artistic expression are fully analyzed. (p. 1)

CDT showed that, “the struggle for social justice and diversity continues but on another plane of development—one that is not simply social, economic, and political, but also psychological, cultural, discursive, and carnal” (Hall, 2019, p.1). CDT also revealed that certain elements stigmatize the perspectives of individuals with ASD. ASD is seen as a hidden disability; therefore, ASD is not as visible as a physical disability which could possibly cause someone with ASD to feel powerless or invisible among their peers. Ingham (2018) further noted that CDT helped to identify and disentangle factors that reveal the social construction of

disability; therefore, CDT was a lens that exhibited the challenges in inequitable social, political, and economic practices.

Culturally responsive leadership affects one's tendency toward learning if it is not adequately executed and displayed on college campuses. Therefore, college leaders must design the most effective ways to equitably educate and include students with ASD without isolating them or segregating this population of students from their peers. As disability studies continue to revolutionize and make an impact in various areas of the social sciences (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), the increasing presence of students with ASD in higher education environments and in their communities has increased the awareness of hidden disabilities such as ASD. In addition, Meekosha and Shuttleworth (2009) explained that, with a need for social justice for ASD individuals, it is best to incorporate a conceptual understanding of disability such as CDT and understand the terms of engagement regarding disability.

CDT does not seek to describe lived experiences based on a medical model, yet this theory helped to clarify the obscured perspectives about individuals with disabilities from the sociopolitical aspect. Sociopolitical is defined as a combination of social and political factors. Often, the sense of belonging of individuals with ASD can be "jeopardized due to the students' encounters with a network of social expectations, activities, responses and biased attitudes" (Pesonen et al., 2020, p. 1). CDT "challenges able-bodied supremacy and the oppression that arises from restricting economic and social benefits to persons with disabilities which are then redistributed as privileges to be negotiated" (Gillies, 2014, p. 1248). Utilizing CDT allowed one to not have an altered perspective, but a clearer perspective regarding equitable accommodations and inclusiveness for students with disabilities in higher education.

CDT has emerged as an approach to the study of disabilities over the last decade (Vehmas & Watson, 2014). The goal of CDT was to critique the ideas about disability and expand the theorization around disabilities (Vehmas & Watson, 2014). CDT also had hidden elements that draw on the concepts of gender, race, and sexuality (Vehmas & Watson, 2014). For example, an African American individual is obviously a different ethnicity from a person with Asian descent, which is like one with a hidden disability such as ASD and an individual with a physical disability that is easily seen with the human eye.

Another limitation of the CDT was how the theory was used to measure justice (Vehmas & Watson, 2014). Some researchers have questions about how to use CDT to evaluate different elements of justice and what components of CDT are applicable to disability studies. Vehmas and Watson (2014) suggested that some researchers do not consider materialistic resources as applicable to the study of disabilities. The resources that a person with disabilities has access to depends on various structures in society, such as the laws, customs, power relations, cultures and, other social norms (Vehmas & Watson, 2014). Ferguson and Nusbaum (2012) emphasized that political theory considers cultural variation and must be normatively objective because individuals can often submit to the status quo against their relevance and adjust to their own deficiencies.

According to the ADA (1990), people with any disability cannot be disallowed the opportunity to enter college or the workforce. Therefore, allowing those with disabilities such as ASD to be overlooked would go against the educational, civil, and human rights of students with ASD (Vehmas & Watson, 2014). In the fight against social disadvantage, researchers, administrators, and policymakers use CDT to challenge and determine what topics scholars must address to help people with disabilities claim their power. Vehmas and Watson (2014) explained

that “Being different from the so-called normal majority is no longer considered to conflict with a good life, equality and respect” (p. 647–648). CDT is focused on a positive movement for future studies in disability, but still has challenges in offering guidance on how to solve ethical impasses and allocate goods equitably to persons with disabilities (Vehmas & Watson, 2014).

CDT is a theory that gives power to the voices of people with disabilities rather than focusing on the actual disability (Hosking, 2008). CDT examines the social, cultural, and political aspects of what surrounds people with disabilities (Hosking, 2008). Hall (2019) also concluded that:

While power and incongruence have material effects, including disabling effects on embodiment, these critical disability theorists will describe disability in immediate reference to power, including its exclusions and hierarchies in discourses and institutions. This, however, again points to the importance of CDT (p.1).

Hall (2019) believed that scholars must pay attention to the “abnormality, hierarchies of capability, and other exclusionary constructions related to disability simultaneously deepen and are deepened by analysis of racism and sexism” (p. 1). Hall also noted that if disability is a direct expression of power, then this power and the power’s effectiveness on human life would not be understood without treating disability both politically and socially. CDT’s perspective of strength relies on the assumptions of the capacities, talents, and knowledge of those who design policies for disabled people (Hiranandani, 2005).

Critical Disability Theory and Evaluating Educational Inclusion

Although chronic illnesses are less visible or invisible, there is still no universally defined term for disability unless expanded by the interests of the one who is defining it (Jung, 2002). Liasidou (2012) discussed a discourse in social justice regarding students with disabilities and

the inclusive education policy and practices that involve questioning how schools approach relationships and structures in social and educational domains. Liasidou (2012) also wrote about former theorists' pleas to end the oppression and marginalization of certain groups and link a human rights approach with inclusive education policy. Furthermore, Armstrong and Barton (2007) further explained:

For us inclusive education is not an end, but a means to an end. It is about contributing to the realization of an inclusive society with a demand for a rights approach as a central component of policymaking. Thus, the question is fundamentally about issues of human rights, equity, social justice, and the struggle for a non-discriminatory society. These principles are at the heart of inclusive educational policy and practice. (p. 1)

Inclusion is a term that identifies those with disabilities in the neoliberalism policy world (Bolt & Penketh, 2016). Thus, the term inclusion has been embraced by people who exercise diversity for those who may seem neurologically different. In higher education, inclusion for persons with disabilities is not necessarily avoided, but it can be conceived that the term has been weakened in terms of multiculturalism involving the disabled student population (Bolt & Penketh, 2016). Jung (2003) asserted that those with disabilities are a group who may need special attention regarding equity in higher education. Jung further posited that in the procedures for college administrators, policies are usually proposed to merge the interests of those with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. Moreover, students with disabilities become positioned with their institution's accommodations and services in such a way that it may seem as if their accommodations are being lawfully and rightfully met.

The Critical Disability Theory and the Separate Concept of the Social Model of Disability

For the sake of this research, CDT was a lens that was used to evaluate the social-political equity at a university in the Mid-South. CDT was better used as the theoretical framework because it does not question the fundamentality of a physical disability, but the inclusiveness and academic equity of those with hidden disabilities such as ASD. The social model of disability is a concept that can be applied for the sake of recommending a model that can be used on the college campus. The social model of disability can be included in the policy development and classroom structure or design for students with ASD to provide a sense of neurodiversity. I did not identify barriers or how individuals with disabilities are excluded; however, I did apply CDT to unassumingly evaluate the practices utilized by college administrators and staff to assure inclusion for students with ASD.

Furthermore, Robertson and Ne'eman (2008) mentioned the lack of quantitative studies available regarding the emergence of expansion and supports for college students with ASD. Administrators and staff in disability resource departments and similar higher education disability service areas can use the social model of disability in the development of policies to assure equity and inclusion for students with ASD. According to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, educational institutions are now responsible for making reasonable accommodations to help persons with disabilities obtain equal access in higher education environments (Stanley & Manthorpe, 2002). Although accessibility and equity policy may enable students with disabilities to enter larger institutions, these students have left these campuses feeling unaltered because of their unmet needs for their hidden impairments (Rizvi & Lingard, 1996).

Conclusion

Although attending college after secondary school may not be a good fit for all students with ASD, college administrators should still prepare for those who have a goal of receiving a college degree. Furthermore, college administrators and staff should receive consistent professional development and other training to assure that students with ASD are receiving an equitable education. Agran and Wehmeyer (2000) noted how college students with intellectual disabilities performed better in school after receiving the support they needed. Wright (2017) noted that in many university environments, students with ASD who require special accommodations must get assistance from the disability department administrator, and the administrator will reach out to the professor to best accommodate the student. The professor, according to Cox et al. (2017), is ill prepared in their training to assist and instruct students with ASD. Although many students attending college are not receiving the reputable services that are advertised, those services are still being modified for the betterment of students with ASD on college campuses. Support mentors and coaches are in dire need for this population on college campuses at every level. Just like general education students, students with ASD should be reminded that with effort, they, too, can accomplish anything. Chapter 3 details the research methodology that explains how data will be collected.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate the inclusion practices of college administrators and staff for undergraduate students with ASD at a university in the mid-South. I conducted this study in a university setting because in many university environments, students with ASD who require accommodations are directed to a department that aids with disability services. Such departments have a requirement that students who claim to have a disability provide supporting documents that identify them as disabled. This chapter provides a discussion in the following areas: (a) research design, (b) theoretical perspective, (c) methodology, (d) research sample, (e) data collection methods, (f) trustworthiness and reliability of study, (g) subjectivities, and (h) chapter summary.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I addressed inclusion practices for students with ASD at a university in the mid-South by seeking the answers to specific questions. The guiding research questions for this study were:

1. How successful are the academic and social support practices implemented by administrators and staff at a university in the mid-South in promoting inclusion for undergraduate students with ASD?
 - a. How do college administrators and staff apply practices to promote inclusion for students with ASD?

Research Design

I used Critical Disability Theory (CDT) as a theoretical framework or the lens to design my research in evaluating the inclusion practices for students with ASD. Using CDT as the theoretical framework along with the method of qualitative process evaluation helped me

identify administrators and staff inclusion practices and determine how their knowledge of accommodating undergraduate students with ASD is being used to inform the practice of inclusion. Hall (2019) noted that critical disability theorists tend to use CDT to be directed towards “activism” (p. 1) because CDT can and has been applied to identify the measures of justice for people with disabilities. Although researchers have used CDT as a research design to aid in describing the sociopolitical constructions of disability, CDT was also applied to studies that address the lived experiences of persons with disabilities and identify distinctions between people with disabilities and nondisabled individuals. Moreover, Hall stated that “disability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and power(lessness)” (p. 2). In this study, I used CDT to assess the inclusion practices used by administrators and staff at a university in the mid-South. Specifically, I used CDT to determine how well the practices put into place for students with ASD assure inclusion.

My use of Critical Disability Theory (CDT) aligned with my use of the evaluation method because I sought to evaluate inclusion strategies used by administrators on college campuses. The process evaluation method allowed me to identify strengths and weaknesses in the program processes while recommending needed improvements in the conclusive section, or Chapter 5, of this study (Bess, King, & LeMaster, 2004). It was vital that I understood the term *evaluation* in the context of this study. While comprehending this term “evaluation,” Weiners (n.d.) suggested that researchers plan, monitor, evaluate, learn, and apply the findings. Thus, during the research process, I contemplated expected outcomes, followed the study plan, and used an evaluative method to connect the data throughout this study. Moreover, there are requirements in place for disability resource administrators and staff to support students with

different abilities from a disability resources department administrator, and the administrator who would then communicate those needs to the department's staff. The staff delegated to reach out to the professor(s) and academic coaches will determine how to best accommodate the students in the classroom and on campus (Wright, 2017). Critical Disability Theory also assisted in interpreting my findings by providing a lens that allowed me to understand the social phenomenon for students with ASD. Furthermore, CDT allowed me to respond to my research questions by identifying the gap in how inclusive practices are decided and applied for students with ASD. I continued using CDT to develop a comprehensive understanding of inclusive practices for students with ASD (Carter et al., 2014) and to assist in increasing the trustworthiness of my research results. Furthermore, equity and accessibility for college students with ASD was assessed.

Process Evaluation Method

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.-b), process evaluation determines whether a program that has been designed has been executed as intended and results in certain outputs. Process evaluation allows the researcher to strengthen their ability to report on a program and provide information on what may be required to improve a program. Moreover, the process evaluation method helps to identify (a) who the policies were developed for, (b) what the programs have accomplished for the population it was designed for, and (c) barriers to implementing future policies or activities. The process evaluation method also allows the researcher to determine whether the program is accessible to its target population.

Hatfield et al. (2018) conducted a study using the process evaluation method to determine the effectiveness and barriers for students with ASD in a transition program. Although this study was not conducted with college undergraduate students, the process evaluation method allowed

Hatfield et al. to identify that all students with ASD were not served equally. In a different study, Odom et al. (2010) suggested providing evaluation models to family members to assist in the evaluation processes for programs designed for their loved ones with ASD. Ashbaugh et al. (2017) further elaborated those individuals with ASD are entering college at increasing numbers; however, students with ASD are feeling lonely and isolated. Ashbaugh et al. (2017) used the process evaluation method to assess the social planning intervention processes in higher education that were designed to increase social integration for students with ASD. Using the process evaluation method, Ashbaugh et al. (2017) determined that students with ASD could increase their interests in their postsecondary program, improve their organizational skills, and set targets for specific social skills with more intervention from college administrators and faculty. Ashbaugh et al. (2017) also cited that providing social support services to students with ASD will likely enhance their ability to be successful in obtaining a higher education degree while improving their chances of a long-term outcome in life.

Table 2 provides the results of Ashbaugh et al.'s study (2017). Specifically, Table 2 displays examples of the social activities evaluated using the process evaluation method.

Table 2

Examples of Social Activities

Nonsocial activities	Community-based social activities with peers	Extracurricular activities with peers
Dinner with family	Student organization meeting	Recreational class
Bike ride on own	Dorm event	Student clubs
Attending class	Dining out	Community groups
Playing computer games online	Local community event (e.g., fair)	Sports
Going to work	Movie theater	Music groups
Meeting with a professor	Outdoor activities	Volunteer organizations

Note. From “Increasing Social Integration for College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder,” by K. Ashbaugh, R. L. Koegel, and L. K. Koegel, 2017, *Behavioral Development Bulletin*, 22(1), 183–196. (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/bdb0000057>).

Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew (2008) described what process evaluation is, why this process should be used and why this method is important by noting that process evaluation “examines the extent to which a program is operating as intended by assessing ongoing program operations and determining whether the target population is being served” (p.1). Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew (2008) also noted that the process evaluation method helps program staff members identify needed interventions and even change modify program components to improve the delivery of their services” (p.1). These authors also noted that process evaluation collects the following:

- Details of program operation,
- Intensity and quality of services provided,
- Context and community in which a program is delivered,
- Demographic characteristics of program participants,
- Collaborative partnerships, and
- Staffing and training. (p.1)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.-b) lists four types of evaluation methods: formative, process/implementation, outcome/effectiveness, and impact evaluation. For the sake of this study, I used the process evaluation method to explore the university's inclusion practices for students with ASD. The process evaluation method is a method that determines whether administrators implemented program activities as intended (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.-b). Outcome evaluation would not be feasible for this study because it is a type of evaluation that investigates whether programs and activities affect outcomes for program and activity participants. Although the effectiveness of certain programs is discussed in this study, the impact evaluation method was not applicable because it focuses more on the assessment of program effectiveness in achieving its ultimate goals (Bowie & Bronte-Tinkew, 2008).

A process evaluation method was chosen because its focus is on whether programs that are already operating are operating as planned (Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew, 2008). This process consists of describing the population, defining what delivery is acceptable, determining what my methodology would be, planning contextual resources, and finalizing my plan after gathering and analyzing data (Sharma, et al., 2017). It would not have been feasible to choose an outcome evaluation method because outcome evaluations investigate whether programs affect outcomes for program participants (Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew, 2008). College administrators and staff may believe their disabilities resource program is effective, however, this study's use of the process evaluation method provided a framework that served as an important first step in this university modifying their evaluation process of their program that already may be in place (Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew, 2008). While using the model of Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew (2008) to proceed with the process evaluation process, I:

- Investigated how the disability resources program is delivered to students with ASD, how it is administered, and whether the program is unfolding on the campus as intended beginning with the web-based resources provided on the university's website, and
- Assessed the reasons for successful or unsuccessful performance based on the graduation rates provided by the university's graduation dataset and provide information for potential replication of successful initiatives (Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew (2008, p.2).

In this qualitative study, the process evaluation method was applicable because qualitative research, generally being collected in a non-numerical format, allowed me to understand more about how college administrators and staff feel about inclusive practices for students with ASD and if they believe their goals were achieved regarding inclusion with this population of students. I used the model of Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew (2008) by following these steps:

1. Found the university's web-based resources to determine 1) their statements regarding ADA, IDEA, accommodations available for undergraduate students with ASD, 2) their administration and staff working in the disability resources program;
2. Identified and recruited administrators and staff to interview.
3. Drafted interview questions to evaluate the university's inclusion practices based on the content analysis of the website.
4. Interviewed the identified administration team and staff.
5. Analyzed the interview data and web content for inclusion practices and success of the inclusion practices, and

6. Wrote the evaluation findings (p.4).

University administrators use the Internet to advertise information on their institution, including faculty, majors, housing, financial aid, and the mission of the university. This study took place at a university in the mid-South where evaluated administrators' inclusive practices for undergraduate students with ASD regarding this population's academic gains and social supports. As a form of content analysis, I utilized the Internet to review the university's web-based resources to see if they offered a specific area for onlookers to research programs available for undergraduate students with ASD. Furthermore, I analyzed the web-based content provided by the university website to investigate if there were statements regarding ADA, IDEA, and the career preparation tools available for undergraduate students with ASD.

I interviewed those who make decisions regarding students with ASD as I learned more about (a) how the school's mission statement and overall goals included this population and (b) how educational inclusion practices are applied and are operating as planned. Furthermore, I focused on administrative and office staff from the department that aids ASD undergraduate students because staff in this department designed and provided disability policies and means for this population. The group of administrators and staff who served as a sample for this study assisted me in evaluating program implementation and design, program processes, policy design processes, and the staff's ability to assure campus engagement and inclusion.

Research Sample and Setting

There are five administrators and staff members, as well as eight graduate assistants in the department that aids ASD undergraduate students. Due to this study's focus on a specific group of individuals, purposeful sampling was used. Creswell (2007) recommended no more than five participants be used for this type of qualitative study, however, I interviewed three

administrators, three staff members administrators and two graduate assistants, to thoroughly saturate the data following the approval of the director of the department that aids ASD undergraduate students. Due to the varied roles and responsibilities of the participants, more than expected were interviewed.

Following the initial introduction of and approval from the department director of disability resources, I began assessing who would be the best fit, based on their departmental position and contribution, and who was eligible to participate in this study. I presented the administrators, staff, and graduate assistants with an informed consent for their signature to participate in this study following our initial contact and they were made aware that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, and pseudonyms were provided to protect their identity.

The participants in this study met the following criteria:

- Employed by the university and not assigned by an outside staffing agency on a temporary basis
- Be familiar with the policies and accommodations for undergraduate students with ASD
- Willing to openly share what accommodations are provided for undergraduate students with ASD, willingness to speak about policy compliance, and willingness to elaborate on ASD graduation success

Eight participants who met the participant criteria guidelines were interviewed and provided information on the development of policies, the training implemented to ensure equitable treatment among students with ASD, and the experiences of the student population for which these policies and guidelines have been developed. I did not interview students served by the department in this study; rather, I focused on interviewing service providers as

administrators' and staff about their inclusion practices for undergraduate students with ASD. I initially considered convenience sampling as an approach to gain participants; however, purposive sampling was more feasible. I chose purposive sampling, also known as judgment sampling (Etikan et al., 2015), because this approach to participant selection allowed me to focus on administrators and staff who provided accommodations for undergraduate students with ASD.

The university's setting has a campus size of around sixteen hundred acres and an overall undergraduate student body size of a little over seventeen thousand students. Internal pathways for traffic are included and the campus is basically a pedestrian-type of campus that is accessible to elevators, wheelchair ramps, and electronic building entrances. As of 2016, there were at least six hundred and fifty students that enrolled disclosing their disability which included ASD, Adult-Attention/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or learning disabled (LD) which includes Dyslexia (reading learning disability), Dyscalculia (math learning disability), Dysgraphia (writing disability); however, this could also include Special Learning Disabilities, or Not Otherwise Specified disabilities (NOS). Furthermore, of these six hundred and fifty students, at least 250 of this student population revealed having psychiatric disorders and over one hundred of this same student base identified themselves with chronic illnesses. Interviews took place in person and via Zoom teleconference software because of the rise in the Center for Disease Control statistics for Covid-19 during the data collection phase. Participants were made aware that mandates had been lifted for an in-person interview, however, they opted to have a Zoom teleconference instead for safety measures. The interviews took place during traditional daytime hours at the time most convenient for the participants.

Participant Demographics Summary

There were eight participants that shared common experiences in the department that assists undergraduate students with ASD. Of this group, there were five administrative-level

participants and three graduate assistants. Additionally, participants were assigned pseudonyms and their email addresses were not shared throughout this process to protect their identities. This was in addition to those in their department not being made aware of who in the department participated in this study. All participants in this study have specifically worked with and plan to continue to work with undergraduate ASD students. The table below cites the participants who assist undergraduate ASD students at the university in the studied department and their levels of experience:

Table 3

Participant Duration of Experience in Higher Education

PARTICIPANT	DURATION OF EXPERIENCE
A1	10+ Years
A2	3+ Years (Noted working outside of higher education with Higher education for 5+ years outside of the 3+ years in higher education)
A3	10+ Years
A4	12+Years
A5	5+Years
S1	1+ Years
S2	8 months
S3	2+years

Data Collection

I chose two methods for this study's data collection: (1) individual, semi-structured interviews, and (2) content analysis of the university's department that assist students with different abilities for student website information. These methods helped to determine the details of program operation, intensity of quality and services being provided, the context and community in which a program is delivered, demographic characteristics of program participants, collaborative partnerships, and staffing and training.

To collect data for this study, I interviewed participants via Zoom teleconference for safety precautions due to a global pandemic. There were eight participants, which included five administrators and three teaching assistants who all worked in the department that assisted students with different abilities. Each participant responded to eight questions provided in the attached Interview Guide (*Appendix B*). These questions were open-ended questions that allowed me to ask follow-up questions, as deemed necessary, to continuously have the participants engaged in the interview process and to gather their perspectives on the inclusion practices of administrators for undergraduate students with ASD. I recorded those participants who allowed me to which included all eight participants except for one who I was permitted to only take notes from the interview by handwriting them and sending the participant a copy of what was written. As for the recorded interviews, I transcribed the remaining interviews to summarize and assess the participants' responses.

The interview questions were created with the intent of assessing the inclusion practices that were implemented by administrators for undergraduate students with ASD. I followed the data-collection processes cited by Ose (2016) where I utilized Microsoft Office Software, Excel and

Word, to read the collected data. Each participant was clear about exactly what ASD was and that there were various levels a students could fall on the spectrum.

Interviews

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research is usually comprised of interviews. I used in-person interviews that were audio-recorded when permitted by the participant in a secluded environment on the college campus, which was the university library or the participant's office space. When a participant was not able available for an in-person platform for interviewing, I used a teleconference platform, Zoom video conferencing; therefore, four of the interviews were in person and four of the interviews took place via Zoom teleconference software. This type of method allowed me as the researcher to approach the participant with a prepared set of questions that were planned to be asked during the interview process. According to Hammond and Wellington (2013), interviews are "governed by ethical rules concerning consent for the interview, for recording and preserving the subject's anonymity and the confidentiality of the respondent" (p. 91). Using an interview platform giving the participant the option to be in a secluded area or being in a Zoom conference and displaying the room had no other attendees assured confidentiality between the participants and myself.

The open-ended questions designed for the interviewees allowed an opportunity for supplemental responses to my research questions as I stayed within the structure of the interview. Asking the prepared, open-ended questions also allowed the participants to be flexible in their responses in their own distinctive way. A consent to participate was provided prior to the interviews taking place for this study and the participants were also notified that the interview would be conducted on a voluntary basis. All participants were asked to review the consent form prior to providing their signatures. Interviews lasted between thirty to forty-five minutes and

were recorded if permitted by the participants and transcribed using an online transcription software. One participant did not allow their interview to be recorded. The transcriptions provided from this study have been retained in a secured, HP personal computer in a protected folder that, if opened, requires a login and password that is only known by the researcher. All records will continue to remain confidential to the extent provided by all state, federal and local laws.

Website Content Review

The second data collection method was to analyze the content of the university's website for the purpose of understanding the mission, accommodations, and activities for undergraduate students with ASD. I used the content analysis of the university's website to seek out the titles of the administrators and staff and if their position's requirements or duties are listed. My strategy for analyzing the website content consisted of the following steps:

1. Analyzed the university's communication strategies.
2. Data such as web pages were collected to determine content type, relevance, and clarity.
3. Coded themes across all data points, then analyzed the data points to draw conclusions about website effectiveness.

Information provided from the website content used in this study was also used as a supplement of the research applied as an example for the reader to clearly understand what the department is, the accommodations they provide, their position on inclusion, and the population the department serves. The analysis of the website's content has been paraphrased for the reader to understand what was provided on the university's website without disclosing what university was used for this research.

Participant Recruitment

The interview data collection process began with me speaking with the department(s) on campus who provide services for undergraduate students who have different abilities. At the selected university, I emailed the lead administrator in the department that assists ASD undergraduate students about soliciting administrative staff as participants for my study, requesting permission to speak with departmental staff and schedule interviews. The initial e-mail to the lead administrator also included the criteria needed to participate in the study as an attachment. The lead administrator confirmed approval to contact and interview potential participants from the department that assists students with special needs. I began scheduling times and dates to meet with those who agreed to participate in the department and provided the document listing the criteria for participants (See *Appendix D*). The criteria document also included information about the purpose and significance of the study and the criteria that administrative staff must meet to participate in the study.

Once the participants began an e-mail dialogue with me, I replied to their e-mail by attaching my degree-granting university's consent form template. (See *Appendix C*). The informed consent form also provided more details about the study and the body of the e-mail provided steps the participants needed to take to provide their consent to participate in the study. I used my degree-granting university's consent form template and got the required signatures from the participants.

Upon receipt of the responses to the implied informed consent e-mails, I sent an e-mail to the potential staff participants requesting available times and dates for their interviews. Participants were scheduled for in-person interviews or virtual interviews via Zoom teleconference software, whichever platform was most efficient and/or comfortable for them. I

scheduled each interview for one hour. Once the scheduled in-person or Zoom interview began, I explained to each participant that I will audio-record the interview with their permission, explained who I was and the purpose of the study, explained that no rewards or monies would be given, explained the informed consent and that interviewee responses would be kept confidential, and explained that interviewees could opt-out of the study at any time. The university campus provided me with an opportunity to build trust with potential participants, attend meetings for public advocates for students with various abilities, and observe their methods and policymaking strategies for undergraduate ASD students. Following each in-person or Zoom interview, I transcribed the audio-recorded interviews using a free transcription service named “Otter.ai” from my HP desktop or laptop computer, reviewed the audio and transcripts for accuracy, and saved the transcriptions on a secured and password-protected external hard drive. Once I transcribed all interviews, I asked the participants to check their transcribed interview information for accuracy. If a transcript was not accurate, I worked with the participant to resolve the error. Once all the transcripts were accurate, I thanked and debriefed each participant and reminded them that all interviewees’ identities will remain anonymous and confidential. I stored the data collected for the required length of time suggested by the university in my personal password-secured desktop and laptop devices.

Instrument Development

In the process of developing this study, I, at first, considered the approach of Bess, King, and LeMaster (2004) to develop my interview questions by, first, being culturally “sensitive and aware” (p.111) of the campus environment and the diverse population this campus serves in the community. Acknowledging that there were multiple students on this campus with various disabilities, I considered the number of questions being no more than thirteen questions only

focused on those students who have disclosed being on the autism spectrum and the time allotted for interviews to not be more than one hour. The Critical Disability Framework assisted in framing these questions as a guide and lens to identify the social, cultural, and political equity for undergraduate students with ASD at this university in the mid-South (Hall, 2008). There was a gap in the literature that suggested how to interview or guide those with ASD in responding to questions. Despite this, very little is known about how administrators and staff in disability resources departments, like those at the university where these interviews were conducted, and their preparedness for interviews.

Bearing this in mind, I asked questions regarding the following:

1. Strategies used to develop policies for undergraduate students with ASD
2. The outcomes of strategies used for students with ASD
3. The decision makers for the undergraduate population base regarding inclusion processes and the promotion of these things
4. The involvement of undergraduate ASD students in the policy and activity development process
5. Changes, if any, administrators, and staff would like to see for undergraduate students with ASD

Data Analysis

I used the following thematic analysis steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) in approaching the analysis of the website content and the data I collected from participant interviews:

1. ***Familiarized myself with the data-*** immersed myself in the data by repeatedly reading the data and/or listening to audio recordings to annotate transcripts and make notes to identify what the data means (p.5).
2. ***Generated initial codes-*** Codes, which can be descriptive or interpretive, aided me in providing labels for a feature of the data to interpret and identify what was relevant to my research questions (p.6).
3. ***Searched for themes-*** Was an active process that assisted in the construction of themes found in the data rather than discover them. This process helped me to identify any broad topics or if there were codes that should be bundled (p.7).
4. ***Reviewed potential themes-*** This process allowed me to review the data to check against the gathered extracts of data and determine whether the theme ‘works’ in relation to the data (p.8).
5. ***Defined and named themes-*** Clearly state what was unique about each theme identifying the theme’s clear scope and purpose (p.9).
6. ***Produced the report-*** Provided a compelling “story” in the report of my findings about my data without complexity and impassive terminology to connect the relevance of the themes logically and meaningfully in the data (p.10).

I also used the following approach in analyzing data collected from the university website and participant interviews considered by Braun and Clarke (2006) by applying the following items during the data analysis process:

- Is this a theme or code? If it is,
- What is the quality of this theme or code, and does it tell me anything about my data collected that is useful or relevant to my research questions?
- What are the boundaries of this theme and what does it include or exclude?
- Is there enough data to support the theme?
- Is the data too diverse or wide-ranging or possibly lacking coherence? (p. 9)

Qualitative research provides a variety of options that can be used methodologically as the foundation for analyzing data. CDT helped to guide my analysis in this qualitative study by recognizing the lived experiences of students with ASD who were being entrusted in the hands of administrators who are unaware of students' personal background, experiences, and levels of intellect. When transcribing participant interviews and analyzing data, I utilized the steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006) to assure that data is not "weak or unconvincing" (p.11) and assured that the claims based in my data are justifiable and fit within my overall theoretical perception.

Thematic Analysis Steps

Theme identification is one of the most fundamental and mysterious tasks in qualitative research. Explicit descriptions of theme discovery are rarely found in articles and reports, and when they are, they are often relegated to appendices or footnotes. Coding the data by analyzing for themes using the processes described above was the most feasible way to conclude if inclusive practices are meaningfully being executed for students for undergraduate students with ASD on the participating university campus. The theory used guided the analyses as I considered how college administrators practice inclusive strategies to present an equitable experience for a group that may seem undetectable. Furthermore, to identified themes and coded interviews for

this research, I utilized the method of constructing a spreadsheet using Excel and Microsoft Word as suggested by Ose (2016) and used the following ten (10) steps:

1. Collected the data.
2. Transcribed the audio files.
3. Transferred the text from Word to Excel.
4. Prepared the Excel document for coding.
5. Coded in Excel.
6. Prepared the coded interviews for sorting.
7. Sorted the data.
8. Transferred the quotes and references from Excel to Word.
9. Sorted the text into a logical structure based on the coding.
10. Analyzed the coding.

I applied the following steps recommended by Braun and Clarke's (2006) to analyze the data findings:

Step 1: Familiarization with Data

To start the familiarization process, I reviewed all the pages on the university department's webpage, looking for information on offered services to ASD students, assigned staff members, available support services, and student events that ASD students can attend. In addition to these things, I wanted to see the webpage structure, accessibility, and the overall content. This review gave me insight to participants' potential responses to interview questions relating to information from the webpage. To familiarize myself with the data findings, I reviewed each transcript word-by-word looking for information that stood out to me. When I

reviewed more transcripts, I noticed trends in participants responses, which gave me an idea of what was happening in the university setting. Participants, A1, A2, A4 and A5 all noted

“Students with intellectual disabilities received a mass amount of support from staff members to administrators as well as their parents having access to the staff for questions or concerns.”

Participant A6 gave an in-depth response on how ASD students were provided support from their final secondary year of high school until the completion of their postsecondary degree. Some of those examples provided by A6 began with a campus tour while completing their high school diploma, then being introduced to the college campus and courses, learning what resources were available, how to request accommodations, becoming familiar with their instructors and campus life, and how to prepare for a world outside of the college campus. Once I reviewed individual participant’s transcripts, I became aware of trends.

Step 2: Coding

To code the data findings from the participants’ transcripts I used word frequency such as “support,” “inclusion,” and “isolation,” to identify and label key words and phrases. This process allowed me to organize and label key words and select potential themes from the key words.

Step 3: Generating Themes

The generated themes were based on codes identified from the participants’ transcripts. From the identified codes three themes emerged as noted above. Table 4 cites the themes and subthemes developed in this study:

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes Developed in This Study

Subthemes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Involvement of the campus administration in policymaking• Input from students in policy development• A parent's perspective and feedback considered	Departmental Collaboration and Policymaking Processes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participation of students in campus activities• Engaging campus faculty and staff in collaboration of events• Incorporating "buddy systems" for higher functioning ASD students	Promoting Inclusion and Social Support
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Letters of introduction from students to faculty members• Access to academic coaches and notetakers• Assignment and test deadlines extended• Providing a virtual platform for classes	The Support of Faculty and Staff in Academic Pursuits

In some cases, I decided that some codes were too vague or too irrelevant (for example, they were not frequently found in data). My immediate decision was to eliminate five of the statements and group the remaining three into categories since they were more relevant to my research questions. As I read and transcribed interviews, I noticed that the interview responses repeated, and categories were certainly drawn from the interview responses. The goal of my research was to develop potential data themes that provide useful information.

Step 4: Reviewing Themes

To make my themes useful and accurate, I had to ensure that they reflected the data accurately. Using the data set as a comparison, I checked if my themes were present in the data,

and how I could change them to improve their performance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To make the themes more accurate and useful, I combined them and discarded those that did not appear relevant. The three themes that emerged were relevant to evaluating the college administrators and staff's inclusion practices.

Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes

This step consisted of naming and defining each theme. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), defining themes involves formulating what each theme means and how it can aid me in understanding the data. A theme's definition involves understanding the data and identifying its relationship with other themes.

All participants were asked specific questions as part of the criteria to participate in this study due to the nature of the study. In addition to being an employee of the university in the department that assists students with autism spectrum disorders, these criteria also included knowing the procedures and practices associated with assisting this population of students. Thus, when naming themes, my goal was to choose themes that were concise and easily understood, as well as adhere to my research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The first theme identified was the *Department Collaboration and Policymaking Processes by Department Administrators*. This theme focuses on the process of decision-making within the department, where administrators work in collaboration with campus administrators to develop policies for ASD students, and ASD students are welcome to provide feedback during the process development phase on what accommodations are most appropriate for their population. Initially, policies are provided to students through a university handbook and an accommodating piece of literature that summarizes services and accommodations that can be

requested. Additionally, students and their parents are permitted to give feedback on what is most suitable for them individually or for this student population. The second theme was *Promoting Inclusion and Social Support* where the administrators and staff ensure that a variety of social support and inclusion activities are carried out for those students who are registered as ASD students and served by the department which include ASD students being volunteers on campus for social events or as department aides in collaboration with campus administrators and faculty. The final theme was *The Support of Faculty and Staff in Academic Pursuits* which is defined as the collaborative process between administrators and staff and faculty which involve introductions and awareness given to ASD student professors regarding diagnosis as well as accommodations to aid in the classroom to successfully earn a baccalaureate degree.

Step 6: Creating the Report

In this study, administrators and staff implemented academic and social support practices to promote inclusion for undergraduate students with autism spectrum disorders. Most of the respondents were confident in their responses. However, over half of them recommended that collaborating with other departments and training their students on interfacing with ASD students should be a priority. On campus and in the classroom, all participants noted that social and academic support could reduce the feeling of isolation or "invisibility" among ASD students.

As some participants noted, some faculty members lacked knowledge and training when working with ASD students, which led to the introduction letter of the students to their professors so the professor would be familiar with the student's character and interaction style. Due to an increase in social anxiety, ASD undergraduate students were said to require virtual platforms for classroom attendance following a global pandemic.

Ose (2016) noted that using larger coding software could require the researcher to have difficulty structuring a vast amount of data in a “too advanced or more sophisticated” type of software (p.147); therefore, when coding or identifying themes in data that consists of more than three or four interviews, the use of the ten steps mentioned above and inputting data in Microsoft Word and Excel produced a more flexible Word document that was separated into logical chapters allowing a more systematic method to identify the study’s codes (p.147; see Figures 6-8).

Figure 6

Ose’s Example of Transcribed Text in Excel.

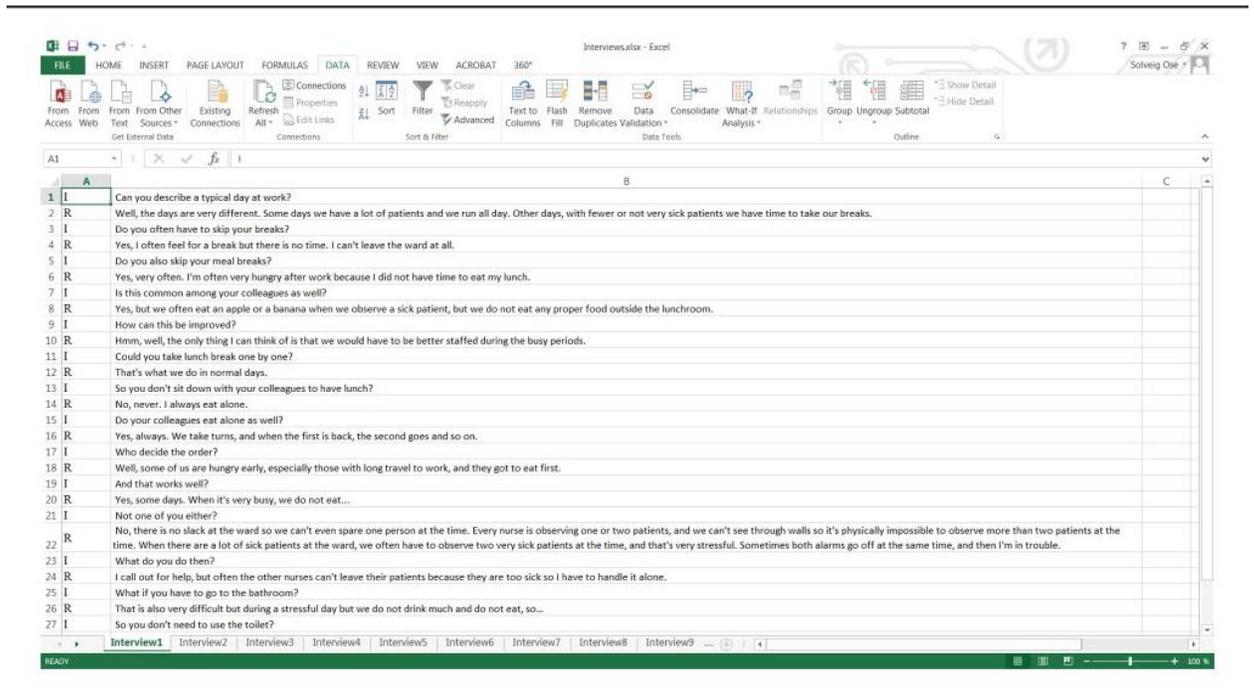


Figure 7

Ose's Example of Filter on Interviewer/Questions Asked and Format Questions in Bold

Font

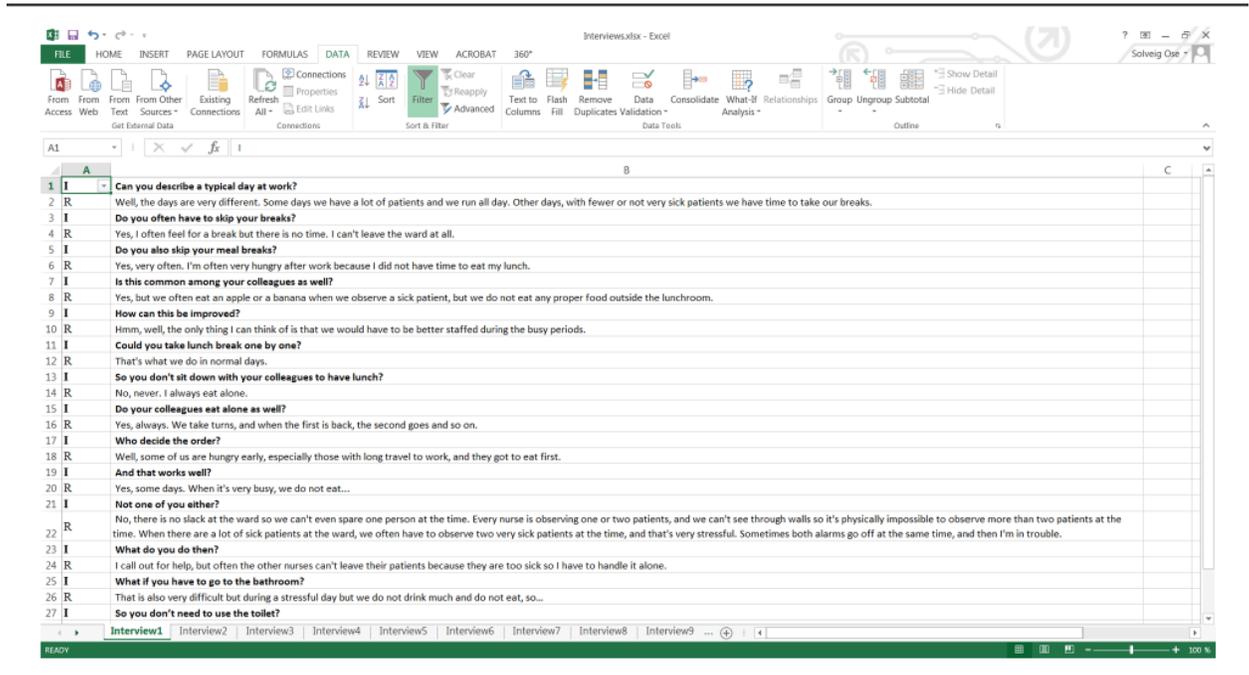
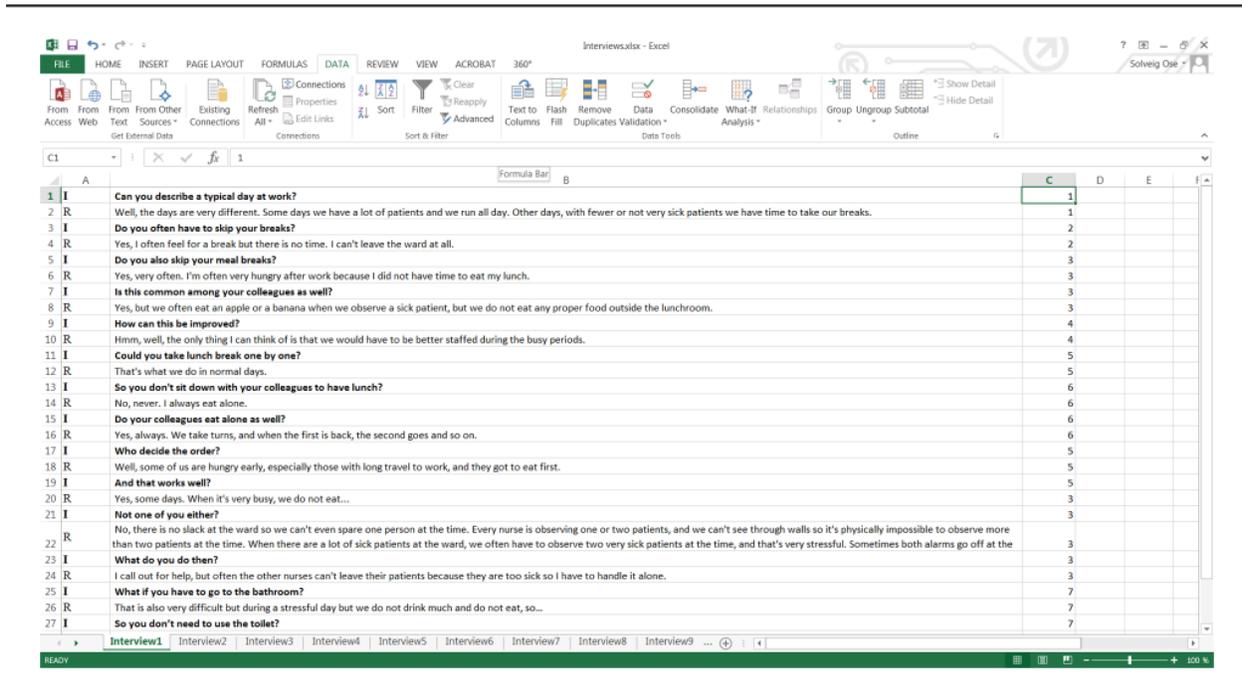


Figure 8

Ose's Example of Code in Column 6



Trustworthiness/Reliability

In qualitative research, particularly, it is vital to authenticate trustworthiness to offer supportive evidence exemplifying the credibility of the findings. For evidence of trustworthiness, I maintained a state of instinctive thinking to link my assumptions, grasp the data, and acknowledge preconceptions that could impede my analysis. By journaling throughout the research process, I was able to distinguish themes in my data and classify them when necessary.

I thoroughly examined each participant's responses from the data collected and utilized Bowie and Bronte-Tinkew's (2008) steps for process evaluation method which ensured reliability. I only used information provided from the university's website and Department's administrators and staff that assist students with different abilities for Students web page, emailed correspondences with the participants' signed pseudonyms, audio recordings and

transcriptions of each interview, and a manual analysis of the data. To further ensure reliability and trustworthiness, I asked participants to review the transcripts including my interpretation of the data to assure accurate representations of their responses were expressed in the collected data.

To further demonstrate trustworthiness, I incorporated confirmability. Confirmability exists when the participants' responses to interview questions aligns with the study's data (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). I spoke to those staff and administrators in interviews that were held via Zoom video conferencing and analyzed how their responses aligned with the context on their university page's website and the graduation rate database provided by the department that accommodates students with different abilities. To gain a better understanding and knowledge of the participants, I spent time with potential participants on the university campus to build their trust and attend meetings for the public who are advocates for students with different abilities and observed their methods and policymaking strategies for the undergraduate ASD student population. I further relied on my dissertation supervisory chair and committee to review my study to ensure that my personal biases would not interfere with the study's findings.

As a parenting educator, I used a reflective journal to remain unbiased about the current school system and the curriculums that are provided for all students. The reflective journal, according to Ortlipp (2008), allows the qualitative researcher to strategically "examine 'personal assumptions and goals' and clarify 'individual belief systems and subjectivities'" (p.695). To further ensure trustworthiness I cited peer-reviewed literature and did not conduct any interviews prior to receiving approval from the institutional review board (IRB) at my degree-granting university. As the topic was researched and IRB approval was granted, I moved forward with the data collection process. Throughout the research process, I only considered the statements by the

interviewees, the Department's website, and the secondary resources found in peer-reviewed journal articles and like resources as credible sources.

I conducted the research with ethical principles and in accordance with the policies and regulations of the selected university. Moreover, I followed all protocols to assure confidentiality and the proper training and certification provided to me to interview human subjects. With the training and certification received in human research, I acted with an active sense of fair-mindedness and equity as it related to interviewing each participant for the sake of the study.

Confidentiality

Participation for this study was voluntary and confidentiality will continue to be maintained within the limits of the university's Institutional Review Board and the selected university. Confidentiality will be preserved by assigning a pseudonym for each participant. I stored the data collected on my personal HP laptop device as suggested by the university.

Subjectivity Statement

Hopkins (2007) noted that researchers should focus on recognizing our own positionality to explore how our individual ways of viewing things influence our politics and how we are able to reflect on our work. There was also a position of confidentiality where I retained all data that was provided by the university identifying programs set in place or the success rates for students with Autism. There must be clarity with those interviewed as they provided me with the data or statements about this group of students and how they were engaged and successful on and off campus with their assistance.

Life experiences can also be impactful for a researcher's subjectivity (Foote & Bartell, 2011). I have experienced watching ASD students being bullied in the classroom with other children who may be classified as general education students or "normal." The experiences of

recalling having to have a child counseled by a school therapist who shared feelings with me about feeling isolated and not a part of their social group was difficult and challenging when I performed this type of research.

Using a qualitative research methodology, this study provides an insight into why this study is important for those seeking institutions with substantial programming for students with ASD. The structure of this research provides knowledge of what is available for this population of undergraduate, ASD students, what, if anything, can be modified regarding policy, and what could be considered for this population's future.

Summary

This chapter described the methodology that was employed for this study. I used a qualitative research design and the process evaluation research method to evaluate the inclusion practices of university administrators and staff who design policies for undergraduate students with ASD. In addition, this chapter detailed the data analysis and data collection methods and cited how these methods properly align with this qualitative study. I reported the findings of this study in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Findings

This chapter will introduce the five administrators and three graduate assistants who participated in the study. Additionally, this chapter presents findings from research conducted on the University and Department websites. Lastly, the chapter begins by summarizing the participants and then presents and discusses the themes identified through thematic analysis in the administrator and graduate assistant interviews. The primary research question was:

How successful are the academic and social support practices implemented by administrators and staff at a university in the mid-South in promoting inclusion for undergraduate students with ASD?

In addition, there was one sub-question posed:

How do college administrators and staff apply practices to promote inclusion for students with ASD?

Using passages from the administrative participants, identified by pseudonyms A1, A2, A3, A4, and A5, and graduate assistants, identified by pseudonyms S1, S2, and S3, this chapter presents three themes and multiple subthemes that surfaced from the data. The three themes generated were (1) departmental collaboration and policymaking processes, (2) promoting inclusion and social support, and (3) the support of faculty and staff in academic pursuits. In the first theme, administrators design policies with campus administrators for ASD students and ASD students, sometimes along with their parents, provide feedback during the processes development phases regarding which accommodations work best for their population. The

second theme, promoting inclusion and support, describes how the administrators and staff ensure that a variety of social support and inclusion activities are carried out for those students who are registered as ASD students. This theme also notes how this population of students assist the department, being volunteers on campus for social events or as department aides in collaboration with campus administrators and faculty. The third and last theme is the support of faculty and staff in academic pursuits. It represents the collaborative process between administrators and staff and faculty which involve introductions and awareness given to ASD students' professors regarding diagnosis as well as accommodations to aid in the classroom to successfully earn a baccalaureate degree.

In my capacity as a process evaluator (Hatfield, 2018), I incorporated the results of the content analysis from the department's webpage into the narratives of participants A1 through A5 and S1 through S3. In the subsequent paragraphs, themes and categories are described (see Table 3). According to this study, administrators and staff implemented academic and social support practices to promote inclusion of undergraduate students with autism spectrum disorders. Most of the respondents were confident in their responses. However, over half of them recommended that collaborating with other departments and training their students on interfacing with ASD students should be a priority. On campus and in the classroom, all participants noted that social and academic support could reduce the feeling of isolation or "invisibility" among ASD students.

As some participants noted, some faculty members lacked knowledge and training when working with ASD students, which led to the introduction letter of the students to their professors so the professor would be familiar with the student's character and interaction style. Due to an increase in social anxiety, ASD undergraduate students were said to require virtual

platforms for classroom attendance following a global pandemic. There is a more detailed explanation of the themes and subthemes below that address the role of students, faculty, and staff as they relate to administration involvement, student input and policy development, and parental perspectives.

Theme 1: Departmental Collaboration and Policymaking Processes

During departmental collaboration and policymaking processes, administrators in the department design policies with campus administrators and ASD students, including at times with their parents, and provide feedback on what accommodations work best for their population. The input of ASD students at the policy-development stage is taken into consideration when deciding what accommodations are most appropriate for their population, however, their feedback is not necessarily guaranteed to be implemented in the policy-making processes. Furthermore, this theme is vital to this study because the consideration of students' input in the development of policy can give this student population a sense of autonomy as it pertains to social and academic support. Moreover, the departmental and policymaking processes for ASD undergraduate students are significant when it comes to providing academic and social support systems.

During the website content analysis for this study, I observed the accommodation procedures and some policies that were outlined for the webpage's viewers. The site noted that the department provides qualified students with disabilities with a comprehensive range of accommodations and services designed to improve their access and opportunities. This webpage also mentioned that it is the student's responsibility to obtain academic accommodations based on their current functional limitations, compensatory skills, and the requirements of the course.

Academic accommodations are provided to all students receiving services from this department; however, academic accommodations are determined individually. This university utilizes an academic management system to manage all academic and disability-related documentation. It is their policy to receive medical, psychiatric, or cognitive impairment-related documentation from a qualified, appropriate professional. Moreover, any medication or therapy prescribed to the student, compliance with those therapies, and possible side effects should all be included in the documentation. According to this university's policy, a university office letterhead with a description of the student's treatment or prescription is usually required in addition to the department's medical documentation form. It was also apparent that this university is not reliant on an undergraduate student's IEP, as they cited that a high school's IEP and Summaries of Performance (SOP) can be helpful, but they are insufficient in the absence of a current evaluation or updated medical records. Participant 1 recalled from multiple parent meetings that, "Parents think that just because their child was accommodated on way when they were in grade school, then it would be the same in college and that's just not the case. They are more afraid then when we share that with them, but they are really looked at as adults now. We still have to accommodate them but just on a level where they still have to have boundaries and some sense of independence."

To determine appropriate academic accommodations, students with Asperger's or Autism may also be required to provide a psychological-educational evaluation. In this university's policies, they also noted that insufficient or inappropriate documentation should not delay students from meeting with their department that assists ASD students and that accommodations may be approved and documented differently by other institutions and/or testing agencies.

Subtheme 1: Involvement of the campus administration in policymaking

Campus administrators, along with the administration in the department that assists ASD students, identified services that were not available on their college campus that may have been available at an ASD student's secondary school. Some of those services included having pullout/pull-in sessions during the middle of a class session. According to Rogers (2002), a pull-out/pull-in session is "a small group strategy where a student would leave their regular classroom to work with students of similar abilities or interests" (p.1). Participant 8 noted that, "Students sometimes seem to like the one-on-one time with their academic coaches because they also use that time to vent about some things. They have more to say than some may think they do." Moreover, students with ASD were not granted the opportunity to individually introduce themselves to their teachers and discretely request accommodations but were given IEP's (Individualized Educational Plans) that their secondary teachers would have to follow when drafting a differentiated curriculum for their assigned pupils. Lastly, students in most secondary schools were not assigned a "buddy" peer if they were a high-functioning ASD student. Participants A5 and Participants S1, S2 and S3 of the staff, acknowledged that they were not a part of the policy development processes with Participant 2 stating that, "Those of us that are in administration do really care about what the kids think, but at the same time, they don't really know all of the policies that we have to follow and still take what they believe they need in mind, so we have to wrestle between the two to sort of satisfy everyone." Participants A1, A2, A3 and A4 acknowledged that they were and that these processes were mainly done internally in their department. Participant 1 mentioned "Administrators have sometimes taken the student feedback as a guide in what to implement as a policy. Some of us have never worked with a population like this, whereas others like me, have done it for years."

As one of the leading administrators pointed out, they would collaborate with the university president's cabinet, and those administrators would provide feedback and solidify policies with their approval. The development processes would be based on the surveys and questionnaires provided to the students who were on the autism spectrum. These would also be based on the experiences of administrators and staff in the department. They noted what was working and what might appear to be a challenge. Participants S1 and S3 stated that they would have liked to be a part of the policy development piece as it related to the retention of students with autism. This is because they worked one on one with the students and were more familiar with what makes them feel less isolated on a university's campus.

Subtheme 2: Input from students in policy development

Administrators and staff explained how they wanted to be both relatable and approachable to students with ASD. It was apparent throughout the interview responses that both administrators and staff were aware that the rights and responsibilities for ASD upon entering postsecondary education were different and could be challenging. Students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environments under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It is the responsibility of schools to identify students' needs, determine modifications, and implement a plan for success based on students' Individualized Education Plans (IEP). There may be significant modifications to a high school's curriculum, testing format, or grading system as a result of accommodations. Students with disabilities at postsecondary institutions must identify themselves as students with disabilities, present disability documentation, and request accommodations.

There is a policy that requires an initial meeting to be held by any student requesting services from the university' departments that accommodates ASD students. This language is also found on the webpage for this department where they list the services provided, and they cite that a student's disability resource specialist can gain a deeper understanding of the student's disability experience during the initial appointment. At the initial meeting, students and their coordinators will discuss the impact of the disability on them, as well as accommodations that have been successful in providing accessibility. Furthermore, as a part of this department's policies, student information forms and disability-related documentation are usually submitted to this office after the initial appointment is scheduled.

Participants A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, S1, S2, and S3 noted that the viewpoints of ASD students are considered in the policymaking processes. As Participant S3 stated, "These students are valuable, will one day be taxpaying citizens of this state and country, and that they are teaching them, so we need to listen to them." Moreover, Participant A1 shared it is because of these students' viewpoints that the introductory letter to professors came about, Participant A5 noted that, "SPED specialists and academic coaching was applied to the program," and Participant S2 and S3 stated that the transitional processes for ASD students into the workforce becoming a priority in their department with Participant S3 emphasizing in the participant interview response, "I think everyone in our department just wants to see them make it. We love to hear the success stories and just see them grow on their own." These examples are all evidence that ASD students' viewpoints and feedback had been considered and applied in their decision-making processes.

Subtheme 3: A parent's perspective and feedback considered

Even as parents prepare their children for college, students are responsible for initiating the accommodations process and communicating their own needs. In college, accommodations do not change coursework or degree requirements and are only meant to remove barriers, ensuring that otherwise qualified students have an equal opportunity to participate in academic programs with modest tailoring to their individual needs. Issues that can arise in policies and decisions are parent communications with the postsecondary school and the parent and the frequency of that participation as it relates to decisions made for their child. Participants A1 through A5 and Participant S3 believe that students, however, are well involved in policy-making decisions and that parents should be more involved. Participant A2 noted that, "Parents can get offended when you tell them that they have to consider the student first because they had been more involved with their schools and IEP's when they were in K-12, so it makes it harder for us trying to get them to understand the college side of things." Participant 1 made a statement in alignment with that of Participant 2 by noting, "Parents can become frustrated when they can't learn more about the grades or other academic-related matters for their child, but we have to comply with FERPA guidelines or then it becomes a liability on the department and for the school." In accordance with the U.S. Department of Education (2019), when a student turns 18 or enrolls in a postsecondary institution at any age, his or her parent's rights under FERPA are transferred to the student. However, under FERPA, institutions can share their students' educational records with parents in certain circumstances. In the case of an eligible student who is a dependent for tax purposes under IRS rules, schools may disclose all information to parents without their consent (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). In addition, FERPA allows schools to release information from an eligible student's education record to parents in cases of health or

safety emergencies (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Additionally, school officials may share information about students based on their own knowledge or observations and not on information contained in education records with parents (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

An interesting conversation arose when secondary education was discussed with respect to the transition to college and parent involvement. Most accommodations requests seem to be driven by parents. Instead of parents advocating for their children, the participants said they would like the students to advocate for themselves. In spite of the FERPA Act, which protects the privacy of student education records, Participant A5 was not fully aware of the role parents played in the policymaking process but was aware that plans were modified for these students based on how they communicated with professors, academic coaches, and tutors. This participant did state that they would like to see in the syllabus for every course and in every department that these students receive services Day 1 of their enrollment on campus. This participant mentioned this because they stated that they have met students who did not know what was available for them and were apprehensive about sharing their diagnosis. This participant believed that the students should feel more welcomed than they already are. This is because all their information is confidential. The university, according to this participant's response, should do better in marketing the services available to this population of students and implement marketing strategies in their decision-making processes. Participant A2 was not fully aware of how involved parents were in the processes of policy regarding undergraduate students with ASD. However, the participant understood these students were greatly involved with their strategic structure in and out of the classroom setting.

Participants A1, A3, A4 and A5 acknowledged that parents or guardians were involved to a certain extent because of the FERPA Act and the school having to maintain the privacy of their students. Those students who allowed their parents to be involved in the educational process signed documents giving this permission. Parents would voice their opinion on what was effective for their child and what was not effective. The viewpoints were considered. Participants A1 and A2 noted that federal and state laws, as well as established university policies all had to be considered when creating guidelines for students with different abilities. Participants S1, S2, and S3 noted that they were aware that parents and guardians may play a role. However, they were all unfamiliar with the depth of their role in the processes.

Theme 2: Promoting Inclusion and Social Support

Several risks and disadvantages can lead to young people's social exclusion. Collaboration with campus administrators and faculty is key to facilitating their inclusion by improving access to high-quality education and on-campus job skills training. In this study, the promotion of inclusion and social support is defined as ASD students volunteering on campus for social events or as department aides. Using the website analysis and participant responses, student coordinators and ASD students discuss how to implement inclusion for the ASD population sharing dialogue about:

- Academic history and the effectiveness of accommodations used by the student;
- Disability directly impacts a student's classroom interaction and learning, such as how the student consumes lecture information, participates in class discussions, or interacts with Internet-based learning;

- Students' study methods, how they manage homework and assignments, and how they complete required readings and written assignments, among other things;
- Test-taking and how students process them;
- In collaboration with the student, the coordinator will discuss and determine the essentials or basic requirements of the student's course of study; and
- The current academic program will be considered in making recommendations for accommodations, adaptive devices, assistance services, compensation strategies, and other support services.

All participants noted what academic and social support practices were being implemented for undergraduate students with autism and all department leaders were a part of the policy and decision-making processes for ASD students. Participants A1 and A2 spoke about the practices implemented for this population of students. Participant A2 also mentioned that they, too, had become frustrated at times feeling as if they were not getting the support from other campus departments in having the ASD population does not feel isolated on campus and in the classroom. This participant emphasized the need to even train non-ASD students to learn more about socializing with ASD students. These practices were being created as policy and drafted in the format of training workshops for incoming and current staff. Participants A3-A5, and S1 through S3 were aware of the practices but were not as familiar with how administrators outside of the department such as the university president and other administrators on the executive team played a role in the development of inclusive promotion for this population of students.

Subtheme 1: Participation of students in campus activities

Wheeler (2014) noted that despite what many people consider, social skills (also included in diagnostic criteria) are important to students on the autism spectrum, and they do impact their academic performance (p.1). Earning a grade in college courses often requires participation in class and group work (p.1). It is necessary to use social skills just to attend class with peers. Autism spectrum students often have difficulty understanding other perspectives, sharing space, or making eye contact (p.1). Participant A5 gave a response in alignment with Wheeler's (2014) context by stating:

Even if we have to walk to an event with them, we just want them to know that they belong here and that we are here for them. I feel bad for them when they seem to be scared of what the other kids may think of them. No matter how much you tell them it doesn't matter what other people think about you, they can still be kind of insecure.

In addition to clubs and college-sponsored groups, social integration programs included social support groups, social skills courses, college-sponsored group activities, social support groups, interpersonal relationship development, and extracurricular activities; however, a high functioning individual with an autism spectrum disorder may have extreme social anxiety and find it difficult to negotiate with others, interact with others, and work in a group. Wheeler (2014) also noted that due to a lack of understanding of "unwritten" classroom etiquette, ASD students commonly misunderstand facial expressions and non-verbal cues (p.1). Students with autism spectrum disorders may be accommodated by taking short breaks from class and/or by allowing them to have a "social buffering" object, such as a computer, a book or anything else that initially seems distracting or "out of place" (p.1). Participant A1 and Participant A5 both

mentioned how they try not to force students into social situations and allow them to decide if they would like to attend an event or be an aide in an event independently. These participants also made responses in align with Wheeler's (2014) context where they mentioned how students with autism spectrum disorders are accommodated by taking short breaks from class and/or are allowed to have a "social buffering" object, such as a computer, a book or anything else that initially seems distracting or "out of place."

Subtheme 2: Engaging campus faculty and staff in collaboration of events

Participants in this study mentioned how there has been outreach to other departments on campus to collaborate with their department for social festivities; however, academics have been discussed apparently as the participants noted the initial intake process that includes students being allowed to introduce themselves to their professors. The participants from the department that assist students with ASD discussed in great length that they do not want to work in silos on campus, but instead, have more collaborative efforts with other departments to accommodate these students.

Participants A1 and S6 mentioned the challenges they experienced with collaborating with other departments on campus regarding campuswide events. These participants noted how they would like to work collectively on events together to provide the opportunity for ASD students to not only mingle with their peers, but to get better acquainted with those in their major department. Participant A5 specifically stated, "Representatives from different departments should be more present at events hosted by the department that assist students with disabilities." This participant also noted that "...there should be more partnerships with campus organizations to avoid division in the autism community." Participant A1 elaborated more on the stresses of trying to reach out to departments on campus and collaborating with them more, but all

departments have not been as responsive as this participant would like. Participants S2 and S3 spoke about how the university hosts a committee meeting for those who are advocates for students with disabilities and their transitioning on and off campus but less than sixty people show up for these meetings on a campus of over twenty-thousand individuals which includes students. Participant S2 noted that many are not aware of the services provided for undergraduate students with autism. Therefore, with a lack of knowledge, it is challenging to serve those students who may need to be accommodated on and off campus.

Collaboration and increased opportunities with university staff have been articulated by the participants as well as collaborative opportunities with off-campus entities. Among the important nonacademic components of college, Wheeler (2014) emphasizes being part of the University culture and norms, as well as establishing opportunities for potential employment prospects. Participant S6 voluntarily stated that “if a sufficient number of volunteers can be recruited, a volunteer peer mentoring program will be beneficial.”

Subtheme 3: Incorporating “buddy systems” for higher-functioning ASD students

Having to cope with social and communication demands of a class may cause sensory overload for students on the autism spectrum. By learning “acceptable” coping strategies, they may be able to stay focused on their intellectual pursuits, so that they can travel through their classes (at least the ones in their chosen field) and pass as “normal” (Wheeler, 2014). There are some students who spend a great deal of energy trying to blend in and not be noticed at all costs. Participant A 1 noted that “the stress may lead some to leave university without completing a degree as a result of this.” This participant also shared that it is common for college students to be undiagnosed or undiagnosed until their college years on any campus.

Furthermore, Participant A1 noted that there were three things that were implemented which included the physical, social, and digital environment all being considered when drafting plans for a student's accommodations as a student and as a department aide. Participant A2 further noted that when students appeared uncomfortable in the classroom setting at times, administrators would quickly make means to accommodate them at home to take their classes online without missing assignments, and with the assistance of academic coaches and tutors. As well, this participant indicated that ASD student services should be advertised with a higher frequency on campus and that advertising the university with testimonials from ASD students on the cover of marketing materials could be feasible for the university. This participant did note that training is required for upper-level and lower-level management to know about the ASD population and how to accommodate and communicate with them regarding their academics. The training focuses on how employees of the department that aids ASD students to equitably accommodate and include students with ASD in the classroom and during social events on campus. The training also includes resources that extend outside of the campus should any employee want to know more about how to support this population of students. Participant A3 stated that ASD students wanted their differences to be recognized and respected. According to Participants A1, A2, and A3, students with ASD pay tuition just like any other student and should be accommodated equally. These participants believe due to the FERPA Act, administrators must be careful in what information is shared with parents and guardians regarding the student's grades. Finally, all participants noted that students are categorized into high intervention students and low intervention students if they are ASD students. Each participant referenced that they are categorized as "A", "B", or "C" students- with "A" meaning they are low intervention, "B" meaning they need a "buddy" on campus in class to assist with

notetaking, attending school events and the like, and “C” students were those who needed consistent custodial assistance, specifically those who were ASD students and had physical disabilities. In addition to club and college-sponsored group activities, social support groups, social skills courses, and student life experiences, all participants reflected on how their department integrated social integration initiatives.

Participants S1 and S2 also noted what other participants mentioned about the stigma of student peers on campus. Participant 3 mentioned, “We provided the buddy system so that ASD students will have someone to go to, or at least someone they can call a friend. We didn’t want them to feel alone or intimidated when asking for help. Having them with a peer seems to help them navigate better on campus than when they would talk to a staff member in our department.” In addition, administrators gaining a better understanding that ASD students can live a balanced, and what some may call a normal lifestyle would be beneficial.

All participants noted what academic and social support practices were being implemented for undergraduate students with autism and all department leaders were a part of the policy and decision-making processes for ASD students. Participants A1 and A2 spoke about the practices implemented for this population of students. These practices were being created as policy and drafted in the format of training workshops for incoming and current staff. Participants A3-A5, and S1 through S3 were aware of the practices but were not as familiar with how administrators outside of the department such as the university president and other administrators on the executive team played a role in the development of inclusive promotion for this population of students.

The administrators interviewed were more familiar with the efforts to promote inclusion as they were the administrators who also created college-based events and social opportunities through in-person and virtual platforms to include students with autism. The staff that was interviewed responded that they were aware of the events and efforts made by administrators. However, they would like other departments on campus to collaborate more in these efforts. This would assure students with autism know they have a campuswide compilation of support. The strategies to promote inclusion, regarding all participants, did include staff members in weekly meetings to provide their ideas and feedback.

Participant A3 stated that “our department should be more involved with social events by hosting our tabling events.” This participant mentioned this as it was a priority for this participant and several others to have a better marketing strategy for ASD students on and off campus. Participants A1, A2 and A3 noted that administrators strive to avoid social isolation by partnering those who request it with peers on campus to attend events, but the participants wish their own department would allow these students to oversee events that are hosted by the department so they could have more campus presence and feel a sense of self-sufficiency.

Participant S5 noted, “We make sure that our ASD students are not isolated from their peers on campus. We try our best to make them feel like they belong here.”

Theme 3: The Support of Faculty and Staff in Academic Pursuits

A single academic support does not fit all students. Autistic students are best supported when administrators, their staff, and their teachers can choose from a range of strategies. Interventions that provide predictability, support, and empowerment while also reducing anxiety and building on strengths are generally effective’ therefore, academic support accommodating ASD students in this study is defined as, first, professors being aware of their students’ ASD

diagnosis, and second, accommodations being provided to aid in the classroom to successfully earn their baccalaureate degree. The classroom design, however, is also a factor when designing a plan in cases where ASD students may have physical disabilities. Participant A1 also noted that an accessibility committee was formed on campus to help pass budgets and support for ASD students. This committee included interpreters for the classroom for the hearing impaired for ASD students who may need this or any like accommodation. Participants A1 through A5 all shared that a student panel hosted by ASD students is held during the academic year to share their experiences about college life and educational programming.

Participants A1 through A5 also noted inclusive strategies such as early registration, academic coaching, a social support group, and informing students about campus events they can participate. These activities included but were not limited to priority registration, reduction in course load, course substitution that does not diminish the program of study, note takers, recording devices, sign language interpreters, extended time for testing, equipping school computers with screen-reading, voice recognition, or other adaptive software or hardware as required or requested. Students are accommodated with an academic coach, tutor, or a peer in the classroom for weekly or biweekly sessions as well as alternate test options (written or visual) should they have ASD and be visually or hearing impaired.

When learning about services offered for ASD students from the university webpage, their motto notes that engaging and involving students in learning is the key. This page also cited that the department, in alignment with the university's efforts, assures equal opportunities and challenges to all academically qualified students with disabilities and complies with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, as well as the ADA. It was also noted that each year, the department that aids ASD students or any different ability, registers well over 600 students.

The department that assists ASD undergraduate students also provides services to students who self-identify as having ASD by registering, filling out an application, and submitting any documentation that documents their disability. Participant A1 confirmed this by citing that a letter of introduction is sent by the student to let the professor(s) know of any different abilities or needed accommodations (*Appendix E*). Participants A1 and A2 gave foundational explanations of serving students with any disability by pointing out that there are some students who may be visually impaired with ASD or hearing impaired with ASD, as well as those who may have a diagnosis of anxiety or depression with ASD. There were three things that were noted which included the physical, social, and digital environment all being considered when drafting plans for a student's accommodations. The classroom design is also a factor when designing a plan in cases where ASD students may have physical disabilities. Participant A1 through A5 and Participants S1 through S3 all additionally noted that an accessibility committee was formed on campus to help pass budgets and support for ASD students. This committee included interpreters for the classroom for the hearing impaired for ASD students who may need this or any like accommodation. Students are expected to disclose their needs and requests to disability services staff; however, students do not always disclose accommodations. Participant S3 did express concerns about students who disclose their diagnoses but don't follow the guidelines. This participant stated, "There are times when I do not push back against the direction a student is heading in, but I do give recommendations on what has worked best for other students with a similar diagnosis."

Participants A1 through A5 also cited that staff is trained, and guidance resources, as mentioned on the department's webpage, have been created to close gaps in communication barriers between staff and the students. These training sessions include elements that assist staff

in identifying barriers ASD students may experience and to help remove or reduce any stigma about this population on campus. These participants further mentioned that this department works proactively with the campus community by forming the accessibility committee that I mentioned earlier. In addition, they would provide training for other offices on campus, and provide consultation appointments in the offices of dissimilar faculty. As well, there is a confidential, one-on-one Zoom conference process for students who do not disclose that they have ASD. Students schedule appointments with department coordinators to share their history in a classroom setting from previous years. In addition, they would discuss if they had any problems such as test taking, note taking, or attendance that needs further support. Participants A1 through A5 and Participants S1 through S3 also noted inclusive strategies such as early registration, academic coaching, a social support group, and informing students about campus events they can participate in as noted on the webpage. Students are accommodated with a peer if they are more comfortable with someone accompanying them to an event. Lastly, Participants A1 and A2 included a student panel hosted by ASD students that are held during the academic year to share their experiences about college life and educational programming. These participants, however, did note that their department has been challenged by faculty members thinking a student with ASD was being discourteous. In fact, the student had disclosed ASD to the faculty member. It was important for faculty members to know how to communicate with students individually instead of isolating them, referring to their letters of introduction when talking to them.

In addition to completing forms on the department's website, professional providers can also access these documents through the university's main website. An initial meeting will be scheduled with them by a member of the department's coordinating staff. Furthermore, the

webpage offers tutorials and training to assist students in the accommodations process, as well as an online management system. These tools were noted being available by the participants for students and their parent or caregiver. Lastly, according to the department's webpage, if a student has a diagnosis of autism or Asperger's Syndrome, they will need to provide staff with a full, psychological evaluation to determine what accommodations they require, which was mentioned by Participants A1 through A5.

Despite the university staff's positive assessment of high school IEPs, an Individualized Educational Plan from a secondary educational institution cannot provide valid, professional information about the accommodations required for an ASD student's postsecondary education. Having this in mind, there are certain steps and questions that will be asked of the student during the initial meeting, including but not limited to:

- History of student academics and accommodations are given that were effective for student's success;
- If there was any impact on student interactions in the classroom, notetaking processes, homework assignment completion, and reading assignments;
- Test-taking needs and processes; and
- Essential needs and requirements for the course of study including recommendations for adaptive devices, including compensatory strategies within the context of the student's academic program.

Parent testimonials are included on the webpage providing information regarding the seamless transition their child experienced into postsecondary education at this university. According to this testimonial, the support and collaboration provided by the department's staff

appeared to be satisfactory. Moreover, the webpage not only shares the mission, goals, and staff in the department, but it also allows non-university staff to sign up as classroom notetakers, which was mentioned by all participants. The attendance policy and reduced course load policies are also provided as well as the list of terms for clarity on the webpage. Although the university's webpage notes that personal caregiving assistance is not provided for students including therapy and the use of individually prescribed aids, it is mentioned that general services for registered students for services from their department include early registration, orientation to using their services, class scheduling assistance, memos or letters to faculty about their needs, advocacy provided for their specific disability, orientation to use campus library and technological labs, and campus opportunities available to them. The university department's webpage also includes career transitional resources that aid ASD students in recognizing their employment skills which was noted by Participant S1. Residence life and transferable skills from the classroom will be included on the resumes that they are assisted with in formatting by university staff, and a career mentoring program is also provided for them to be a part of. Private sector businesses in the community are also provided the opportunity to meet ASD students to extend internship or job opportunities all mentioned by Participants A1 through A5 and Participants S1 through S3. Lastly, this department provides on-campus jobs for ASD students by giving jobs in university buildings as front desk assistants and aiding students in residence halls with administrative needs such as answering phones or monitoring front lobby activities.

Subtheme 1: Letters of Introduction from students to faculty members

There is a unique learning style for students with autism. Students with special needs can be supported by teachers by incorporating their strengths and needs when planning instruction. As a result of this thoughtful preparation, students with autism will be able to maximize their

potential and be able to contribute significantly to class discussions and activities. Bearing this in mind, one of the contributing participants noted that this is why one of the policies for their department was to have students who needed accommodations introduce themselves by way of a letter that describes their individual needs and requests for that particular class. These students would even share their career goals and concerns in these letters, allowing their professors to consider these things when drafting their curriculum and placement of the student in the classroom. It is because of these students' feedback about accommodations received that Participant A1 commented about the introductory letter to professors, Participant A5 noted that SPED specialists and academic coaching was applied to the program, and Participant S2 and S3 stated that the transitional processes for ASD students into the workforce becoming a priority in their department was all evidence that ASD students' viewpoints and feedback had been considered and applied in their decision-making processes.

Subtheme 2: Access to academic coaches and notetakers

College can be challenging for students on the autism spectrum, which often results in the need for additional support. It is all the more imperative that autistic students find colleges that cater to their needs. In contrast to neurotypical students, students on the spectrum have difficulty staying organized when faced with multiple class assignments. For this reason, colleges need to provide additional support, assistance, and plans to assist these students. It is noted on the university's webpage that tutoring is considered a personal service, and the university is not legally required to provide tutoring beyond what is available through the department of disabilities services for any student with disabilities. Participants S1, S2 and S3 all mentioned, however, that academic coaches and notetakers are provided as an accommodation for ASD students upon request or on an as needed basis. Participants A1 and A2 noted that learning

specialists and academic coaches provided support for ASD students through the duration of their program has caused academic success for the students who receive their department's services.

Subtheme 3: Assignments and Test Deadlines Extended

The student coordinators in the department that assist ASD students appeared to be more familiar with assignment and extension requests as they were usually the ones making these requests to students' professors. In this department, students can receive extensions on their assignments, however, the lead administrator asks for reports from their professors to assure that this policy is not abused. The report would include, if extensions were not initially requested, how often a student requested extensions, and if those extensions are being met in a timely matter. Students can receive assistance with their homework from academic coaches and tutors who are available to answer questions, demonstrate skills, and provide assistance.

There have been challenges with test anxiety for some ASD students, as one participant noted:

You never know how they will feel on test day. Sometimes they get so wired up that we have to request an extension from their teacher, and sometimes, they have to take it in a room where it is just them and the teacher. We try to do whatever we need to make them comfortable.

Subtheme 4: Providing a Virtual Platform for Classes

Global pandemics caused physical, mental, emotional, and economic damage throughout the world in 2020. Students with ASD receiving services from this university were hesitant to return to a physical classroom space, even while wearing masks, as they feared contracting this

virus. Despite mandates being lifted, students still feared social events and being in a physical academic setting, so they were accommodated with web-based classroom platforms to complete assignments and extensions to complete tests. As noted by Participant A1, professors often schedule virtual conferences to work with their students and provide them with virtual conferencing links to hear in-person lectures.

Inconsistent Occurrences and Results

Based on the interviews with the eight participants, there were no instances of discrepancy. These participants were all familiar with the policies of the department. They were active in the accommodation of ASD students and recognized that social interaction within the ASD community of students was a priority in the department. As the topic of preparing ASD students for the workforce came about, Participant A1 and A5 seemed to be most knowledgeable and willing to share their thoughts on preparing ASD students for a balanced life outside of the university. Participant A1 voluntarily shared that ASD students knew more than many gave them recognition for. This population of students evaluated for this study are very intelligent when making life decisions and felt that administrators across the campus should collaborate more to accommodate ASD students.

All participants interviewed appeared to be authentic in their responses and in sharing their thoughts on the ASD student population. Participant S3 appeared to show more concern about the university and its preparedness methods for ASD students who may want families or earn their own income without government assistance. There are at least two departments on this university's campus, however, that meet to develop resources for ASD students and are preparing professional development workshops for the other colleges and universities in the

community to train them on the transition to pre-employment placement and bridging students from the academic space into the workforce.

Following is a table that summarizes the above themes with references to participants:

Table 5

Summary of Themes Referenced by Participants

THEME	SUBTHEME	PARTICIPANTS' POINTS OF REFERENCE
Departmental Collaboration and Policymaking Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involvement of the Campus Administration in Policymaking - Input from Students in Policy Development - A Parent's Perspective and Feedback Considered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Wishing to collaborate with other campus department administrators" - "Students perspectives matter and are considered when making and implementing policies" - "the FERPA Act and the school having to maintain privacy of students from parents"
Promoting Inclusion and Social Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participation of Students in Campus Activities - Engaging Campus Faculty and Staff in Collaboration of Events - Incorporating "buddy systems" for higher-functioning ASD Students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Students aid in work study and assist as aids in campus events" - "Would like other campus administrators to work with our office to collaborate on events" - "For students higher on the spectrum, they are assigned "buddies" to help them on campus and in class"
The Support of Faculty and Staff in Academic Pursuits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Letters of Introduction from Students to Faculty Members - Access to Academic Coaches and Notetakers - Assignments and Test Deadlines Extended - Providing a Virtual Platform for Classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Students can personally tell their teachers about their needs in the classroom with a letter to them" - "Students have access to and are assigned academic coaches and notetakers" - "Students can receive extended deadlines for tests and assignments if requested" - "A virtual platform is provided if thy are anxious with their peers in a classroom"

Summary

Chapter 4 included the findings of eight participants who gave individual statements about working in a university's department for disability services. These findings highlight the following themes: department collaboration and policymaking processes by department administrator; promoting inclusion and social support; and academic support accommodating ASD students. In the next and final chapter, the findings regarding the research questions are discussed and future research options are presented.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

This study evaluated the inclusion practices of administrators and staff for undergraduate students with autism. Strategies to prepare students for postsecondary academics as well as transitioning mechanisms to prepare for the workforce were all noted by the participants. These strategies appeared to have positive outcomes for ASD students served on their campus. The purpose of this qualitative study was to not only evaluate the practices of administrators and staff for ASD students, but to also gain in-depth insight into the strategies used to promote inclusion on their university's campus. By including both administrators and staff, I gained a unique perspective on training methods and experience in working with students with intellectual disabilities. Although each participant with the department for disability resources was unique, each shared similar experiences related to the awareness of the ASD student population and their views on how such students could avoid social isolation and feel included in the university community.

When administrators and staff implement academic and social support practices, retention rates can be an effective metric to assess their effectiveness, since higher retention rates generally indicate that students are satisfied with their academic and social experiences and are more likely to continue their education. Retention rates are also affected by reputation, which goes beyond academic support and social support. The responses from the participants of this study have therefore answered the research questions since they shared the varied practices they used to promote inclusion for students with ASD and maintain a successful graduation rate for students with ASD (see *Appendix F*). Through inclusive teaching, accommodations for exams

and assignments, and supportive campus culture, ASD students have access to an environment that fosters both social and academic success.

Furthermore, this study ties in with the literature review, as it identified a gap in literature regarding inclusive practices for students with ASD, and how they can be overcome, as well as how colleges can determine if their inclusive practices are effective, and what outcomes result from effective practices. Moreover, the literature lacked details on how parents involved their children in postsecondary education, which exposed gaps in the literature. Nevertheless, parents invest substantial resources in their children's education and play a significant role in it. The parents of children with ASD do invest considerable time, money, and effort in their children's education and play a crucial role in their children's education, but there is little research on how they support their children in postsecondary education specifically. The field of ASD research is, however, an ongoing one. It is possible that relevant studies or findings have been published since my research concluded. It may, though, be helpful to explore related areas of research. Individuals with ASD who attend postsecondary education may experience difficulties in the transition from childhood to adulthood as a result of their parents' support of that transition. In addition, they may seek out specialized services and therapies, attend workshops and conferences, and develop Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) tailored to their child's needs. Apart from these efforts, parents can also offer valuable emotional and social support to their children with autism. When faced with challenges, parents should encourage their children to develop self-advocacy skills, provide guidance on accessing resources, and offer encouragement and motivation. Although the literature may not cover all the specific ways in which parents with ASD participate in their children's postsecondary education, there is no doubt that parents play an important role in supporting their children's educational success.

It was noted by Madaus et al. (2011) that higher education is becoming more specialized in offering services to students with different abilities. Support services are becoming increasingly important in higher education for students with different abilities. In order to meet these students' unique needs, specialized services and programs have been developed. Services such as these at the university where this study was performed include accommodations such as alternative formats and assistive technology, sign language interpreting, and note-taking assistance may be provided for people with disabilities. As cited by Pinder-Amaker (2014), it is important for university administrators and their staff to understand how to provide inclusive opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities such as ASD. A range of other services, including career services and anxiety and depression support, have been provided at this university to facilitate an inclusive and equitable learning environment as a result of the increased emphasis placed on providing support services to students with different abilities. Additionally, while the participants of this study mentioned some barriers to implementing inclusive practices when working with other university departments, overall, this study indicates that the reported experiences and perspectives of ASD students are considered when establishing policies and practices on this campus for students with autism spectrum disorder.

The Relevance of the Findings to the Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research question and sub-question:

1. How successful are the academic support practices implemented by administrators and staff at a university in the mid-South in promoting inclusion for undergraduate students with ASD?
 - a. How do college administrators and staff apply practices to promote inclusion for students with ASD?

Furthermore, this study's findings align with previous research and with the theoretical framework noting how administrators and staff inclusion practices determined how their knowledge of accommodating undergraduate students with ASD is used to inform the practice of inclusion. It is evident from the participants' statements that the findings of this study are aligned with the theoretical framework, correlating to Sauer and Kasa (2012) that identified their role as inclusive within their department after trainings for staff and administration.

The data from Participants A1 and S5 revealed some significant findings. Based upon their responses, students with ASD are provided with an overall support system by their department, starting with introductions to professors and preparing them for transitions to employment. It is also possible for parents to provide feedback on their children's secondary school experiences, which can be considered when developing policies and curriculums for students with autism. The parent feedback contributed to the development of policies and curriculum frameworks for ASD students.

Participants provided responses that were in line with the university webpage and provided proof of the success of inclusion practices implemented with academic and social supports for ASD students. Participants in this study also expressed a desire for more support from executive-level administrators in training and implementing social support for ASD students with other campus departments. Most participants focused on supporting ASD students in the classroom, however, some did not have much reflection on all the parties involved in the university's policymaking processes and were primarily familiar with the department's policymaking processes and who played a role in those processes. In addition, gaps in the literature were also exposed, since most of the literature failed to mention how parents involved their children in postsecondary education. However, parents do invest substantial resources in

their children's education, and play a significant role in their children's education. Further, social supports were a reasonable accommodation targeted to meet the needs of students with ASD. As indicated in the participant interviews, social supports included not only the staff but also peers, academic coaches, notetakers, and a "buddy system" in which general education students assisted ASD students.

Social integration programs, such as clubs and college-sponsored groups, social support groups, social skills courses, college-sponsored group activities, social support groups, interpersonal relationship development, and extracurricular activities, were also included in these supports. In connection with this study, Brown (2017) evaluated college administrators' and staff's inclusion practices for ASD undergraduate students. The study by Brown (2017) found that peer mentoring is the strongest predictor of ASD specific support services being offered on postsecondary campuses. Five out of 17 studies reported peer mentoring initiatives as part of their social support programs. The courts have mandated and tested reasonable accommodations and modifications for academic purposes through litigation challenging Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the American Disabilities Act of 1990 (Brown, 2017). ASD-specific support services on postsecondary campuses were most strongly predicted by peer mentoring, according to the study. Peer mentoring involves partnering students with ASD with trained peer mentors who are familiar with college life and can provide academic and social support. In postsecondary education settings, this approach has been shown to be effective for increasing student engagement, reducing social isolation, and improving academic performance. Other factors, such as the availability of resources and funding, institutional policies, and the knowledge and training of campus staff members, contribute to the provision of ASD-specific support services on postsecondary campuses. A strong correlation between peer mentoring and

the provision of services for students with ASD in higher education suggests that peer mentoring may be beneficial for supporting students with ASD. Identifying effective practices and interventions for this population is encouraged by studies identifying effective practices in this area for supporting students with ASD in higher education (Brown, 2017). Moreover, when developing inclusive practices for students with autism spectrum disorders, Brown's (2017) study suggests peer mentoring as a valuable strategy. Nevertheless, further research is needed to better understand how peer mentoring can be implemented in different postsecondary education settings to meet the needs of students with autism spectrum disorders.

It is important to note that there are specific types of academic adjustments that are not disability-specific supports such as note takers, testing accommodations for extended hours and separate exams, early registration, reduced courseload, audio recorders, writing center services, and books on tape, calculators, extended time on assignments, preferential seating, frequent breaks, and academic advisors and/or academic coaches; however, this university where the study took place and the university's department that aids ASD students provide all of these supports.

In linking the research questions with my findings, it would be easy to answer that the strategies to execute academic support and inclusion for undergraduate students with ASD and the systems in place are effective for student success and retention rates, as highlighted on the university's website. For the undergraduate ASD student population, the impact of learning processes and educational performance has varied. As a result of the five-year study and evaluation of Weiss and Rohland (2015), the success of communication between the department responsible for disability resources, academic coaches, and professors at the university where this study was conducted was correlated with the success of communication between the

department responsible for disability resources, academic coaches, and professors. The authors concluded: "It is crucial to promote social-communication and executive functioning skills through explicit teaching and guided practice (p.345)."

Upon reviewing the research question as well as the sub-research question posed, we can possibly conclude with confidence that the current academic and social support practices implemented by administrators and staff at a mid-South university have been effective in promoting the academic success of undergraduate students with autism spectrum disorders. The use of inclusion promotion methods and social support by department staff members included introducing students to their professors and buddies as needed. ASD students are also encouraged to learn soft skills, receive hands-on job training in their departments, and lead and attend campus social events by college administrators and staff.

In reporting their practices, participants expressed how they value their work in the department, how they value the students they serve, and how they understood the commitment they made to ensure equity, accessibility, and inclusion for students with different abilities when accepting their job role. Interestingly, these findings were interpreted in accordance with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Hosking (2008) noted the adoption of a "social model" based on the premise that:

"(1) ...disability is a social construct. Not the inevitable consequence of impairment, (2) disability is best characterized as a complex interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment, and the social environment, and (3) the social disadvantage experienced by disabled people is caused by the physical, institutional, and attitudinal (together, the 'social') environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not match the social expectation of 'normalcy'" (p.6).

Participants A1 and A5 expressed the strongest opinion regarding those students with varying disabilities and whether staff members of the department are really paying attention to

them when they request their needs or simply speak to them. Participant S3 said that "These students are valuable, will one day be taxpaying citizens in this state and country, and they are teaching them today, so we need to listen to them." In addition, this participant noted that listening to students with ASD has been helpful in strategizing inclusive practices.

It has also been established in literature that many problematic outcomes occur for ASD students who do not have a sense of belonging from their university administrators, support from these administrators, or social interaction from their peers (Cai & Richdale, 2016). According to these authors' study, most students with ASD felt well supported academically on their university's campus, but not socially; most families felt poorly supported in both areas (p.31). For my study, the participants all had similar responses when it came to the policies and structure of the department to assist ASD students, however, their statements were somewhat in alignment with the study of Cai and Richdale (2016) noting how the academic supports were available but needed the social supports from every department on the campus.

It is important to take a multidimensional approach when discussing autism spectrum disorder (ASD) with college students, staff, and administrators. Among the topics that could be discussed by these groups are:

1. Introducing ASD by defining it, describing its prevalence, and describing its symptoms. As a result, a shared understanding of autism can be provided to set the stage for further discussion.
2. Access to assistive technology, academic coaching, and counseling services may be helpful for college students with ASD.
3. Provide training for faculty and staff members, provide access to support services, and foster an environment of acceptance and understanding for students with autism.

A positive campus climate can be created and students with ASD can feel supported and welcomed.

4. Promote advocacy and outreach for individuals with ASD by involving college students and administrators. ASD advocates can participate in awareness campaigns, volunteer with local organizations, and advocate for policies supporting individuals with ASD.

These actions create a more informed, engaged, and supportive campus community surrounding ASD. It is important to approach the topic with empathy and understanding, and to be open to questions or feedback from others. Participant A5 noted the difficulty the department has in providing accommodations to those who do not wish to disclose their disability in its entirety in fear of embarrassment. Additionally, this participant reported that students have requested private Zoom meetings to disclose any different ability, which the department's staff obliged. The participant mentioned that while multiple services were available, some students may show signs of autism spectrum disorder, but because this participant does not have the professional license or expertise in the field, he or she cannot provide a proper diagnosis or accommodation. Moreover, the participant noted that assumptions have been made about students having special needs both in and out of the classroom, and staff allows students to accept the accommodation or decline it. Among the goals identified by administration and staff is to support student with intellectual disabilities and to provide them with a sense of autonomy.

Critical Disability Theory acknowledges that public policy must address both the biomedical and social aspects of disability (Hosking, 2008). To address social marginalization, public policy dictates that changing the social environment is the appropriate policy response for students who may continue to face it in the future (Hosking, 2008). As a result of utilizing

Critical Disability Theory, I was able to evaluate within this study the concept of normalcy, inclusion practices that recognize independence and interdependence, along with issues of intersection between disability and class or other socially constructed categories (Hosking, 2008).

It was found that while evaluating administrative and staff's inclusive practices, it was recognized that each participant has a unique report based on his or her personal experiences, that supporting students with varying abilities was a priority in their department for them to be successful, and by success, the research participants meant graduating with their peers.

Participants found that transitioning to postsecondary education was more successful for ASD students when they received the department's support. While some students might not have been able to finish their degree within the average four-year deadline due to personal setbacks or obligations, administrators and staff supporting these students have legitimately recognized the dilemmas students may face due to their differences and have come up with ways to respond to them in a way that is equitable, inclusive, and accessible.

Strengths and Limitations of Study

Several strengths were evident in this study, including the willingness of the participants to discuss their inclusion practices and the fact that this was the first study of its kind in the department during their tenure. I was able to recognize, as the researcher, the profound initiative the department's administrators had regarding promoting inclusion on their university's campus by hearing about the benefits an undergraduate with ASD could acquire while enrolled at this university, including the benefits that would follow them once they became an alumnus. During the course of the study, precautions had to be taken to prevent the researcher or participants from becoming ill due to the global pandemic. As a result of the university having to serve their students, scheduling became a conflict for both the researcher and the participants. A further limitation with this study is that at least three individuals expressed interest in participating, yet they didn't meet the eligibility criteria. One limitation included one participant not wanting her responses to be recorded. Lastly, to uphold credibility, I directed the interviews toward the topic and all other limitations were ultimately alleviated.

Theoretical Implications

Rather than viewing disability as a medical condition with a fixed cause, Critical Disability Theory (CDT) examines disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. According to this theory, disability is not solely determined by an individual's impairment, but also by social and cultural factors such as stigma, discrimination, and institutional barriers. Disabilities are excluded and marginalized by social structures and attitudes that CDT challenges and transforms. When applied to evaluating college administrators' inclusive strategies for ASD undergraduate students, CDT emphasizes the importance of addressing social and cultural barriers that may prevent students with ASD from fully participating in higher education. In

addition, these efforts include challenging ableist assumptions and practices that view disability as a deficit or limitation and instead promoting inclusive and accommodating environments that value the diversity of individuals with disabilities. Additionally, CDT emphasizes the importance of including individuals with disabilities in decision-making processes by centering their experiences and perspectives. This means involving students with ASD in the development and evaluation of inclusive strategies and policies and recognizing their knowledge and expertise as valuable contributions. CDT provides a critical lens for studying inclusive strategies for ASD undergraduate students, highlighting the need to challenge ableism and promote social justice.

In accordance with the responses of the participants in this study, the administrators and staff appeared to demonstrate practices to aid in the academic and social development of these students. With these considerations in mind, CDT recognizes disability as a social construct that is shaped by attitudes, beliefs, and practices that exist in society. Using these results, I was able to demonstrate how students at this university are provided with resources to help shape their practices, beliefs, and attitudes, both academically and socially. In addition, CDT advocates for a social model of disability as well as the self-representation and participation of disabled people in shaping policies and practices that affect their lives. The university allows students to provide feedback to aid in the development of policies and practices affecting their academic and social environments and performance. Through challenging ableism and advocating for disabled people's full inclusion and participation in all aspects of society, CDT seeks to promote social justice and equality for people with disabilities. Participants in this study provided examples of inclusive strategies for academic and social success for students with ASD. Participants' responses revealed the importance of individualized accommodations and support, including:

- Offering academic coaches to help students take notes in their workspaces;

- Providing clear, concise instructions for academic assignments;
- Facilitating social interaction through structured social skills groups and campus events; and
- Accommodations for changes in routine, such as advance notice or introductions to their professors via memos or introductory letters.

According to the results of this study, more inclusive practices were observed than expected before the research began. As well as extended assignments and counseling services, it was interesting to hear about the methods used for getting acquainted with the professors and their environment as well as the "buddy system" that was in place. The research participants confirmed, however, through this study and in responding to the research questions, that peer mentors, assistive technology, and social support efforts were available and accommodating. According to the participants' responses, there can be some challenges when applying CDT since there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution to promoting inclusion for students with ASD, as what works for one student might not work for another. The study involved some challenges related to communication.

Communication and social interaction can be challenging for students with autism spectrum disorders, which can make it difficult for them to participate in discussions or express their opinions. Especially when attempting to apply CDT, which relies on dialogue and collaboration to challenge ableist assumptions. Moreover, other CDT frameworks may prioritize the experiences and perspectives of individuals with physical disabilities over those with intellectual or developmental disabilities, so students with autism may not be fully represented. Even with these challenges, it is essential to continue using CDT principles when working with students with autism spectrum disorders. The process may involve acknowledging and

addressing ableism, promoting accessibility, and advocating for the rights and needs of ASD students. To ensure that unique needs and experiences of individuals with ASD are taken into consideration, it may also involve working collaboratively with their families and professionals on the university's campus.

Practical Implications

Mentoring is a promising approach for promoting inclusive strategies for ASD undergraduate students. Through peer mentoring, students with ASD can navigate the challenges of college life and achieve academic and personal success. As well as fostering social connections, peer mentoring can provide support networks for students with ASD who may struggle with social interaction. Peer mentoring has practical implications for the study of evaluating college administrators' inclusive strategies for ASD undergraduate students, such as involving students with ASD in the development and evaluation of peer mentoring programs. Administrators and staff can tailor peer mentoring programs to meet the specific needs and preferences of students with ASD by soliciting their feedback. Furthermore, programs can be made inclusive and accommodating for all students, regardless of their disabilities.

The importance of providing students with ASD with the resources and accommodations to be able to participate fully in peer mentoring programs is another practical implication of peer mentoring. Peer mentors can be trained and supported to work effectively with students with ASD, as well as assistive technologies and other accommodations to help students with ASD communicate and learn more effectively. It is the responsibility of college administrators and staff to provide these resources and accommodations to ensure that peer mentoring programs are accessible and beneficial to all students. Collaboration and social connections among students with ASD can also be enhanced through peer mentoring. Students with ASD who struggle with

social communication and interaction can benefit greatly from peer mentoring programs that pair them with experienced peer mentors. Moreover, peer mentoring programs can facilitate collaboration between students with ASD and their mentors in setting goals, developing strategies for success, and addressing challenges. Ultimately, peer mentoring is an effective approach to promoting inclusive strategies for undergraduates with autism spectrum disorder. A peer mentoring program can support the success of students with ASD in college and beyond by emphasizing collaboration, social connections, and social justice, as well as providing necessary resources and accommodations. As a result, administrators and staff can ensure that peer mentoring programs are accessible, effective, and beneficial to students with ASD by involving students with ASD in their development and evaluation.

Administrators and staff members who work with college students with autism spectrum disorder should be trained in providing support that is also tailored to their individual needs. There are several potential strategies to consider:

1. In order to communicate effectively with students with ASD, communication channels should be established. Many of these students have difficulty communicating. Supplementing verbal instructions with written instructions or visual aids may be necessary.
2. Socialization plays an important role in the college experience for students with autism spectrum disorders. Socialization opportunities, such as clubs and events, can be provided by administrators and staff members.
3. Students with autism need accommodations tailored to their specific needs. Additional time may be given to students on exams, assistive technology may be used, or other accommodations may be made to support their learning and success.

College administrators can improve support for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) by implementing the following changes in practices:

1. **Improving Awareness and Understanding:** Administrators should educate faculty, staff, and students about autism spectrum disorders and how they may affect the college experience of a student. As part of this effort, training can be provided on strategies for supporting students with ASD, and resources can be made easily accessible.
2. **Developing Support Services:** Ensure that support services are specifically tailored to the needs of students with autism. As part of this service, students may receive academic support, counseling, peer mentoring, and accommodations for disabilities. Students with autism should have access to these services and be able to access them easily.
3. **Creating a Structured Environment:** Structured environments can be beneficial for students with autism spectrum disorders. It is important for college administrators to create an environment that is predictable and consistent, minimize distractions and sensory overload, and implement clear schedules and routines.
4. **Offering Sensory-Friendly Spaces:** Students with autism spectrum disorders can greatly benefit from sensory-friendly spaces. Students can retreat to these spaces when they feel overwhelmed in a calm and safe environment.
5. **Fostering Inclusive Social Opportunities:** Social interactions can be challenging for students with autism spectrum disorder. A college administrator can facilitate inclusive social opportunities by creating clubs and organizations that cater to the

interests of students with autism spectrum disorders. As an additional option, providing training in social skills or peer mentoring can be considered.

6. **Ensuring Accessibility:** It is essential that students with ASD have access to campus facilities, services, and events. Assistive technology, accessible buildings, and sensory-friendly events are all part of this effort.

Students with ASD can be better supported and supported academically and socially by college administrators implementing these changes in practices.

Future Research

According to the findings of this study, I have several recommendations for action and further research. College and university executive leaders need to be present and transparent on campus; therefore, future research studies should explore how university administrators can become more familiar with the ASD community, their needs, and avoid creating an environment that isolates these students from their peers on campus. To better support students with ASD, Pazez, et al. (2014) suggested increased training for administrators and collaboration with other campus stakeholders. The training and awareness of disability service professionals and university administrators of students with ASD could be enhanced through a mixed method approach. A mixed method approach can augment the benefits of quantitative and qualitative studies, enabling one to gain a more complete picture than a standalone study.

Additionally, using mixed method studies to explore the experiences of university administrators and students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be beneficial. To improve support for students with ASD, I would recommend the following mixed-method studies:

1. In-depth interviews with university administrators to explore their experiences and perspectives on ASD were conducted following a survey of administrators to assess their knowledge and attitudes.
2. To better understand the experiences and needs of university students with ASD, a quantitative analysis will be conducted followed by qualitative interviews with subsets of them.
3. An investigation of how campus policies and accommodations impact the experiences of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This study uses focus groups as well as survey data.
4. Research that uses quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the transition from high school to college of ASD students.

Mixing methods can help university administrators and students with ASD gain a detailed understanding of their experiences and can assist in identifying areas for additional support. Using a variety of data collection methods, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges this population faces and develop effective strategies for addressing them.

Associating the Critical Disability Theory in future research would be helpful in assisting those who work with individuals with intellectual disabilities in developing comprehensive policies and inclusive practices. During the literature review, there were few studies that reflected the social interaction and collaboration of students with ASD. Through their involvement in such research studies, ASD students would be prepared for social interaction and the workforce with a deeper sense of self-sufficiency and knowledge of community resources so they could be more successful in their future careers.

University presidential cabinets should consider incorporating trainings for other administrators across campus, but they, too, should participate in policymaking processes relating to the transition of ASD students into the workforce, just as they do for those students who receive resources from the campus's career development department. Additionally, university administrators should educate community stakeholders and public officials about the need for funding and enrollment of ASD students.

The university where this study was conducted offers students with ASD a prodigious environment and a wide range of resources so their families can be involved in their academic journeys as well. Many college students fall into a gap due to not declaring their diagnosis because they are more likely to need assistance on a college campus than on a secondary school campus. It would be helpful for future studies if researchers looked deeper into the issue of self-disclosure and self-advocacy for the ASD population who attend postsecondary education. The study by Ciccantelli (2011) also supports my contention that secondary schools ensure students who wish to pursue postsecondary education have the readiness skills to enroll by providing advanced preparation in the social, self-advocacy, and organizational domains during the IDEA-mandated transition planning phase of high school.

Universities and colleges may want to consider enlarging their options for accommodating students with autism spectrum disorder to meet their unique needs that aren't met by traditional accommodations for physical or other cognitive disabilities. Moreover, there is a need for more research in the areas of transition to and from postsecondary education to ensure a path to employment, and how parents can take an active role in their children's success. Consequently, in contrast with well-established research on parent participation from birth

through high school, research on parent involvement in postsecondary education is scarce, especially for students with autism spectrum disorder.

As well as providing basic accommodations, colleges can also inform future ASD students that they welcome students with autism spectrum disorders and will provide more comprehensive support than they may have received in secondary school. Researchers can identify gaps in support by studying the experiences of past and current students and developing effective interventions. In order to meet the unique needs of students with ASD, colleges and universities can develop effective support programs and accommodations based on evidence-based recommendations. As a final suggestion for future research, administrators should explore funding systems to support pilot programs for university, four-year and two-year colleges that offer autism spectrum disorder programming and supports to provide data that can be utilized to determine the outcomes of this student population in accordance with the study by Ciccantelli (2011). Training solutions provided in the college can be included in this data, as well as various aspects of the program, such as the success of ASD students in their social groups, completion of coursework, career plans, successful integration into the college community, retention rates and postgraduate outcomes (Ciccantelli, 2011).

Young adults with autism spectrum disorders should be prepared for college years earlier. College students with an autism spectrum diagnosis will be better prepared to advocate for themselves by receiving a proper diagnosis, individualized early intervention, and careful transition planning. The professors and other staff of post-secondary colleges and universities must also be prepared for the increasing numbers of students with autism who seek to enroll in these institutions. To ensure equal access to college education, these students must be provided

with reasonable accommodations. Individuals on the autism spectrum could miss out on many opportunities for society if they are not supported in their post-secondary academic pursuits.

Using the lessons learned from this study as a template for guidance, further studies should be conducted with a broader range of administrators, professors, and staff members. It is also important for college students to receive training to help them communicate with ASD students to avoid feeling isolated. To better understand how local institutions help implement inclusion for the study's target population, future studies could compare programs that assist ASD students to local institutions. Some of these steps could include:

1. Analyzing the transitional processes from secondary to postsecondary school settings for ASD students
2. Researching the processes of program development at higher education institutions
3. Identifying the number of ASD -specific programs domestically and internationally

Taking a closer look at the experiences of students with significant disabilities would lend insight into their unique accommodation needs and satisfaction to college administrators and their staff. To enable and encourage access for these individuals, this research would need to be carefully designed. It is also possible that the individuals who chose to participate in this study are more involved in neurodiversity, thus providing insights based on their experiences related to neurodiversity.

It is therefore important to include external offices beyond disability services when it comes to supporting students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). To explore this further, these research studies are recommended:

1. An investigation of how housing and residential life can support students with autism spectrum disorders. Studying how staff members in residential life are trained to

assist students with ASD and what accommodations on-campus housing offers these students could lead to a better understanding of how this can be done.

2. An exploration of how academic departments can support students with autism spectrum disorders. Students with ASD may be supported by academic departments with policies and accommodations that are in place. Faculty members may gain insight into their experiences when working with students with ASD.
3. Studying the role of student affairs departments in supporting students with autism spectrum disorders. The purpose of this study is to examine how student affairs staff members work with ASD students to facilitate their transition to university life and provide social support.
4. A study that examines how various offices collaborate and communicate with ASD students. Identifying areas for improvement could be achieved through this study by examining the effectiveness of current methods of communication and collaboration.

In collaboration with external offices beyond disability services, universities can gain a more holistic understanding of how to create a supportive and inclusive environment for ASD students through these study recommendations. A study like this can identify areas for improvement and provide advice for implementing effective strategies for supporting these students during their university years.

Parents, ASD college students themselves, and Participatory Action Research (PAR) strategies aligned with Critical Disability theory can be incorporated into research studies to help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for ASD students. Parents of college students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) could take part in a study exploring their experiences and perspectives. Researchers could examine the challenges that parents face in

supporting their children with ASD in college, as well as the resources and support that parents find most helpful. Students with ASD may benefit from an exploration of their experiences. These students may face challenges in navigating university life, as well as what types of support and resources they find most helpful. Data could be collected using surveys, interviews, or focus groups. In addition, participatory action research (PAR) strategies aligned with Critical Disability Theory can be a substantial approach to researching ASD college students. The student-centered approach empowers ASD students to explore their own experiences and perspectives, as well as identify solutions that matter to them. A PAR strategy can include several methods, such as focus groups, community forums, and collaborative data analysis. In such research, the aim is to empower ASD students and develop strategies that meet their needs and reflect their experiences.

Since the number of students with autism spectrum disorder enrolled in postsecondary education is increasing at an alarming rate, colleges and universities that enroll these students should take measures to meet their specific needs (Longtin, 2014). Moreover, the Critical Disability Theory being applied to this study and focusing mostly on the social capacities of the target population, it was found that inclusive practices for students with intellectual disabilities could not be accommodated with mechanisms such as teaching assistants or minimal classwork assignments. To promote inclusion in and out of the classroom, students are provided with modern-day accommodations through personal introductions to their professors, peer buddies based on their location on the spectrum, and social interaction at departmental events to provide a sense of social interaction among students. According to Participants A1, A5 and S3, the previous policies did not adequately impact the academic success of ASD students in the classroom; therefore, parental feedback and child feedback have been and continue to be

considered in the development of future policies to provide a comprehensive education for all students.

ASD students are provided with internal support at the university where this study took place. Due to the need for employees and training, the cost of supporting this student population has escalated in the past five years, according to two of the participants of this study. As part of the university administration's support program, parents can learn about community resources they can obtain for their children who will soon graduate from a postsecondary program. In addition, the tools should be provided to assist students in their education, while at the same time assisting them in developing a sense of independence. It was the intent of this study, however, to be placed within a department on a university's campus that had developed programs that were specifically customized within their existing infrastructure to assist students with ASD.

A study conducted by Helen Perlman in 1957 remains relevant today. In Perlman's (1957) view, it is not the sole responsibility of the student to resolve their problems, but instead of the student themselves, it is the responsibility of the university administration, the student and anyone else involved in assisting the student. University administrators and staff develop curriculum that addresses the needs of ASD students by establishing cooperative connections with them. Therefore, inclusive education uses natural human development and change processes (Perlman, 1957). To ensure equity in postsecondary education for students with ASD, administrators and staff at universities need to be reminded that although equity is often used interchangeably with the related principle of equality, it encompasses a wide range of educational models, programs, and strategies that are not necessarily the same. "Equity is the process; equality is the outcome" given that equity - what's fair and just - may not always reflect

strict equality (what's applied, allocated, or distributed equally) in the process of educating students (The Glossary of Education Reform, n.d.).

Conclusion

Using a qualitative, process evaluation approach, this study examined how college administrators and staff develop and apply inclusion practices at a mid-South university. This study focused on evaluating the procedures and policies that resulted in successful graduation outcomes for students with ASD. Even so, college university administrators demonstrated that a coordinated effort was made to assist ASD students and that ASD students can have enriching and fulfilling experiences in their lives. Despite being a parent of an ASD student, I wanted to know if postsecondary education institutions provide support and significant components in their curriculum for students with invisible disabilities.

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Appendix A

Stress Level Report of Parents with Students with ASD

Figure 1. Most Stressful Situations Reported by Students and Parents/Professionals

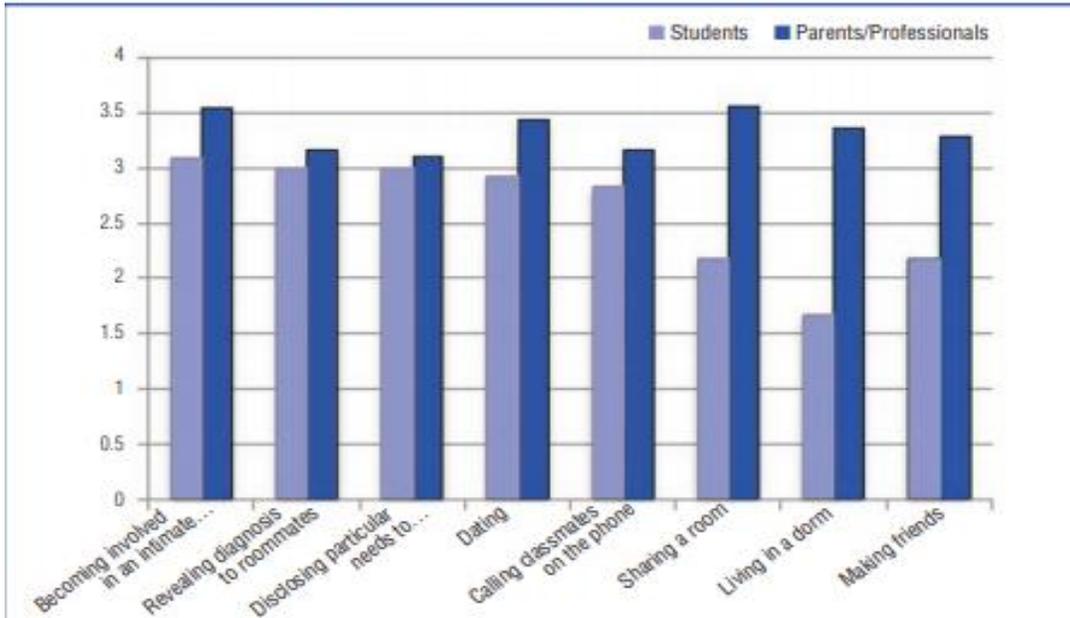
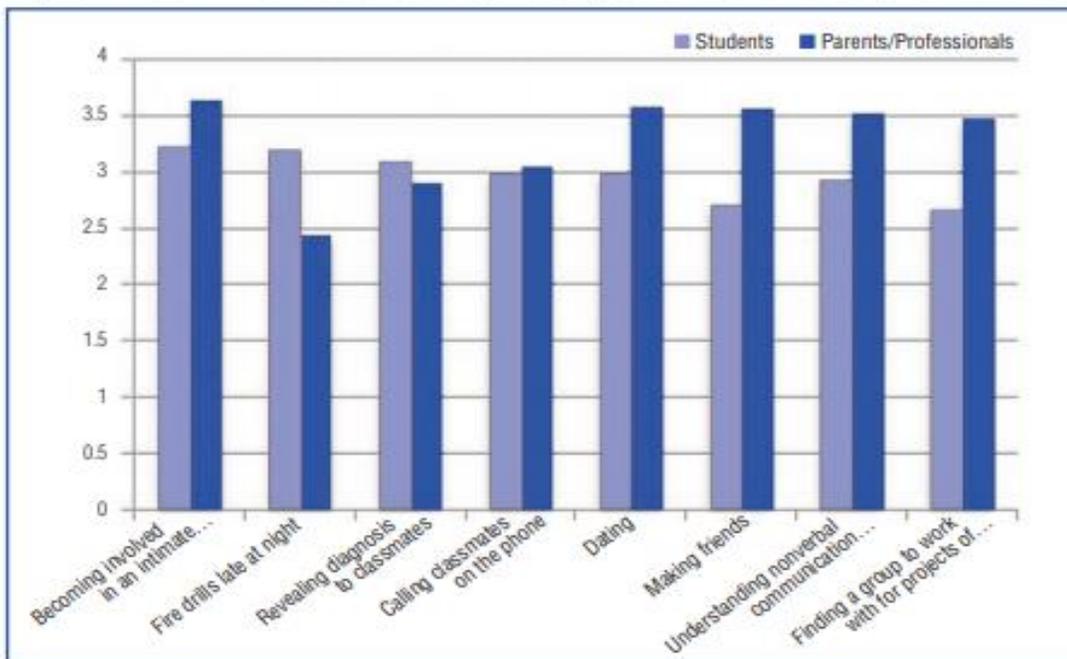


Figure 2. Most Difficult Situations Reported by Students and Parents/Professionals



Appendix B

Interview Guide

Hello and my name is Kimberly V. Bracey. I am a doctoral student, and I will be guiding today's conversation to satisfy the requirements for a dissertation study. I will be transcribing our discussion as I evaluate the inclusion practices for undergraduate students with autism spectrum disorder at your institution. The purpose of today's discussion is to gather your perspectives and there is no right or wrong answer.

To facilitate a timely session, I may kindly ask you to finish a thought so all questions can be adequately addressed and for you not to just respond with a "yes" or "no" response. The session is expected to last approximately 45 minutes to one hour.

This conversation will be taped with an audio recorder software on my cellular device for later data analyses. All content discussed today is confidential and compliant with my university's institutional review board guidelines. I will respect your privacy by not discussing content outside of this room.

You have the right to stop at any time without being penalized and if you decide to not participate or to withdraw from the study and you will not be jeopardized.

1. What types of academic and social support practices do administrators and staff apply to promote inclusion for undergraduate students with ASD?
2. How do college administrators and staff strategize to apply these practices to promote inclusion for students with ASD?
3. What do you see as the biggest hurdles, or challenges, encountered by students with ASD feeling included and not isolated in post-secondary schooling? (Please think about the students themselves).
4. What strategies would you use to address the biggest hurdles or challenges encountered by students with ASD?
5. What are the policy development processes for ASD students and who makes campus policy decisions related to ASD students to ensure inclusion?
6. Are the viewpoints of parents considered in the policymaking process for ASD students?
If so, how?

7. Are the viewpoints of ASD students considered in the policymaking processes for this population of students? If so, how?
8. What have been the inclusive strategies used for ASD students and the outcomes of those strategies?

Closing Prompt

Thank you for sharing your knowledge with me today and I appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. Once this interview has been transcribed, I will reach back out to you to assure accuracy and clarity of your responses. This will allow you to confirm what may have been left out or misunderstood. Again, I appreciate your time and participation in this study.

Appendix C
Informed Consent

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

**An Evaluation of College Administrators and Staff Inclusion Practices for Undergraduate
Students with Autism**

Title	PRO-FY2022-200: An Evaluation of College Administrators and Staff Inclusion Practices for Undergraduate Students with Autism
Researcher(s)	Kimberly V. Bracey, The University of Memphis
Researchers Contact Information	Phone Number: (601) 214-0156; Email: kvbracey@memphis.edu

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher(s) any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about one of eight people to do so.

Key Information for You to Consider

Voluntary Consent: You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to evaluate how college administrators and staff develop and apply inclusion practices for undergraduate students with ASD at a university in the mid-South. By doing this study, I hope to learn the strategies for developing practices to assure inclusion for undergraduate students with autism. You are being invited to take part in a research study about college administrators and staff inclusion practices for students with autism. You are being invited to take part in this research study because the researcher is trying to evaluate the processes of applying inclusion practices for undergraduate students with autism spectrum disorder. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about eight (8) people to do so.

Duration: It is expected that your participation will last between thirty and forty-five minutes. You will only be asked to volunteer for this study once for the allotted amount of time mentioned.

Procedures and Activities: You will be asked to respond to questions regarding the policies designed for undergraduate students with ASD, views on the policies, and how accommodations for students with ASD

re decided.

Risk: Some of the foreseeable risks or discomforts of your participation include administrators or staff not feeling at ease sharing their personal feelings about the policies or accommodations for undergraduate students with ASD.

Benefits: Some of the benefits that may be expected include learning more about policy and accommodation development for undergraduate students with ASD. There is also the benefit of participants learning if policies and benefits in place may need modification or reconsidered as a whole.

Alternatives: As an alternative to participation is that you could voluntarily participate, and the only alternative is to not participate.

Who is conducting this research?

Kimberly V Bracey, LI of the University of Memphis, Department of Leadership is in charge of the study. She will be guided by Dr. Wendy Griswold (Faculty Advisor). There may be other research team members assisting during the study. No member of the research team has a significant financial interest, and/or conflict of interest related to the research.

Why is this research being done?

This research is being done to evaluate how college administrators and staff develop and apply inclusion practices for undergraduate students with ASD. By doing so I hope to learn the strategies for developing practices to assure inclusion for undergraduate students with autism.

How long will I be in this research?

The research will be conducted at Ned R. McWherter Library on the campus of the University of Memphis, the Department of Disability Resource for Students, Wilder Tower at the University of Memphis, via Zoom teleconference or via Skype teleconference. If you choose the library location, you will need to come to Room 315F on the 3rd Floor of the Ned R. McWherter Library. You will meet me in Room 110 at Wilder Tower Building on the campus of the University of Memphis should you choose to meet in the Department of Disability Resources for Students office. Each of those visits will take about 45 minutes to an hour. You will only be asked to volunteer for this study once for the allotted amount of time mentioned.

What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?

If you agree you will be asked to respond to open-ended questions regarding the policies designed for undergraduate students with ASD, views on the policies, and how accommodations for students with ASD are decided. As a participant there are no costs associated with taking part in the study. The only costs are your time which ranges from 45 minutes to one hour. We will make every effort to keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. Moreover, the dissertation committee will also review this information and, if published, an academic journal that is released for public viewing. All identities will be, however, changed to pseudonyms for the participant's protection.

The privacy of every participant will always be protected. The actual names of participants will remain undisclosed and replaced with the use of pseudonyms (also known as aliases) that are assigned by the researcher. All transcribed material will also be concealed in a secure location at the researcher's residential location on a desktop or laptop computer with a secured passcode to enter. The transcribed files will also be kept in a secure file on these devices.

What happens to the information collected for this research?

The privacy of every participant will always be protected. The actual names of participants will remain undisclosed and replaced with the use of pseudonyms (also known as aliases) that are assigned by the researcher. All transcribed material will also be concealed in a secure location at the researcher's residential location on a desktop or laptop computer with a secured passcode to enter. The transcribed files will also be kept in a secure file on these devices.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

We promise to protect your privacy and security of your personal information as best we can and confidentiality will be maintained within the limits of the university's Institutional Review Board and the selected university. Confidentiality will be maintained by assigning a pseudonym to each participant. I will store the data collected for the required length of time on my personal HP laptop device as suggested by the university. Steps to maintain participant privacy and data confidentiality include:

- I will transcribe the audio-recorded using a free transcription service named "Otter.ai" to transcribe interviews from my HP desktop or laptop computer, review the audio and transcripts for accuracy, and then save the transcriptions on a secured and password-protected external hard drive.
- Once I have transcribed all interviews, I will have the participants member check their transcribed interview information for accuracy. If a transcript is not accurate, I will work with the participant to resolve the error.
- Once all the transcripts are accurate, will store the data collected for the required length of time suggested by the university on a secured and password-protected external hard drive.

Individuals and organizations that monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect the research records. This monitoring may include access to your private information. These individuals and organization include:

- Institutional Review Board
- Any other individual(s)/entities

What other choices do I have besides participating in this research?

If you do not want to take part in the study, there are no other choices currently; however, if you are a student and decide to take part in this study, your choice will not affect your academic status or grade in your class.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?

It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. It is also ok to decide to end your participation at any time. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decided to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship

with the researcher(s) or the University of Memphis.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?

There are no financial costs associated with participation in this research study.

Will I receive any compensation for participating in this research?

You will not receive any rewards or payment for taking part in the study.

Who can answer my question about this research?

Before you decide to volunteer for this study, please ask any questions that might come to mind. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Kimberly V. Bracey at (601) 214-0156 or via email at kvbracey@memphis.edu. You can also contact Dr. Wendy Griswold, Faculty Advisor, at (901) 678-5439 or via email at wgrswold@memphis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu. We will give you a signed copy of this consent to take with you.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this document. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions throughout the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this consent document. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, my legal representative or I may be asked to consent again before my continued participation.

As described above, you will be audio-recorded while performing the activities described above. The audio recording will be used for transcription of your interview responses. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of being audio recorded as described.

____ I agree to the use of the audio recording.

Name of Adult Participant

Signature of Adult Participant

Date

Researcher Signature (To be completed at the time of Informed Consent)

I explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understands the information described in this consent and freely consents to participate.

Name of Research Team Member

Signature of Research Team Member

Date

Appendix D

Initial Contact Message and Criteria

To the Lead Administrator of the department that aids ASD undergraduate students:

My name is Kimberly V. Bracey, and I am a University of Memphis doctoral candidate living in a central Southern state. I am in search of research participants who are employed in your department. I would like the assistance of other administrators or staff to participate in this study; however, participants must meet the following criteria:

- Employed by the university and not assigned by an outside staffing agency temporarily
- Be familiar with the policies and accommodations for undergraduate students with ASD
- Be with the university past their probationary period and aligned in their departments or the university's handbook to assess department familiarity.
- Willing to openly share what accommodations are provided for undergraduate students with ASD, willingness to speak about policy compliance, and willingness to elaborate on ASD graduation success
- Ability to clarify training for staff and graduate assistants to provide disability resources for undergraduate students with ASD

If you meet the criteria and are interested in assisting me with this research project, please contact me via email at kvbracey@memphis.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Kimberly V. Bracey

The University of Memphis Doctoral Student

Appendix E

Template Letter of Introduction for ASD Students

Instructions:

1. Replace **STUDENT NAME** with your first and last name in black. You may also include your preferred name.
2. Replace the **preferred pronoun** with the appropriate preferred pronoun in black.
3. Follow the instructions in red contained within parentheses and remove them from the letter.

Dear Professor,

I am emailing to introduce you to **STUDENT NAME**, a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who is enrolled in your class. **The preferred pronoun** has been copied on this message. If **First NAME** decides to request specific academic accommodations, you will receive a faculty notification email, which will contain information about those accommodations, as well as information on assisting our office with arranging any needed testing accommodations.

This is NOT an accommodation notice. Rather, this email intends to foster understanding and facilitate communication. Below you will find information regarding **STUDENT** and tools that may be useful in the classroom for **preferred pronoun**, as well as others in the class.

As mentioned previously, **STUDENT** has autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a neurobiological condition on the mildest end of the autistic spectrum. Students with ASD may be highly intelligent, academically gifted, and uniquely qualified to succeed in the intellectual atmosphere of higher education. Despite academic strengths, **STUDENTS** may find certain aspects of higher education to be a

challenge. Below are some specific challenges that can be attributed to ASD:
(please remove anything that doesn't apply and feel free to add other descriptors)

- Lacks proficiency in social nuance and niceties
- Frequent errors in interpreting others' body language, intentions, or facial expressions
- Problems with tangential ramblings, particularly when working with peers on group projects
- Stuttering, mutism, or getting distracted during presentations
- Difficulty understanding the motives and perceptions of others
- Difficulty with the big picture, perseverate on the details (can't see the forest for the trees)
- Difficulties with transitions and changes in schedule
- Wants things "just so"
- Deficits in abstract thinking (concrete, focuses on irrelevant details, difficulty generalizing)
- Unusual sensitivity to touch, sounds, and visual details, may experience sensory overload
- Poor or unusual eye contact
- Problems understanding implicit social rules (such as personal space and hygiene)
- Literal understanding of language (difficulty interpreting words with double meaning, confused by metaphors and sarcasm)
- Expressing emotions appropriately

Below are some tips that will promote productive interactions with **STUDENT**:
(Please make this area specific to you by removing anything that will not be helpful)

- Avoid absolute words such as "always" or "never" unless that is exactly what you mean
- Allow **preferred pronoun** to ask questions to garner a clearer understanding of course content and readings
- Make **preferred pronouns** aware of group work activities before the date of activity and assist in facilitating understanding of **preferred pronoun** behaviors. Let **preferred pronoun** group know that it is okay for them to say,

“Let’s get back on task,” when he is rambling.

- Clearly define course requirements, the dates of exams and when assignments are due. Provide advance notice of any changes.
- Make sure all expectations are direct and explicit. Don't require **preferred pronoun** to "read between the lines" to glean your intentions. Don't expect **preferred pronoun** to automatically generalize instructions.
- Provide direct feedback to **preferred pronoun** when you observe areas of academic difficulty.
- Encourage use of resources designed to help **preferred pronoun** with study skills, particularly organizational skills, and counseling.
- Avoid idioms, double meaning, and sarcasm, unless you plan to explain your usage.
- If the need should arise, work with **preferred pronoun** to develop a plan for potential behavioral issues and clearly outline acceptable behavior, unacceptable behavior, and consequences for unacceptable behavior.
- Contact the Disability Resource Center with questions or concerns at 901-678-2880.

I greatly appreciate your efforts to further your understanding of **STUDENT**'s condition and to assist **preferred pronoun** in being more successful in your class.

Kind Regards,

Appendix F

Undergraduate ASD Student Graduation Rates (2018-2022)

(Anonymous numbers were assigned under “term” by the last 2 digits and the year student graduated in the 1st 4 numbers by the department director) graduation

term	graduated
201950	Yes
202180	No
202010	Yes
201850	Yes
201880	No
201880	Yes
202210	No
201910	Yes
202050	Yes
201980	Yes
202010	Yes
202210	No
202210	No
202080	No
201910	No
201950	Yes
202010	Yes
202010	No
201980	Yes
202210	No
202210	No
201950	Yes
202210	No
201980	Yes
201980	Yes
202210	No
202080	Yes
201980	Yes
201980	Yes
202210	No
202210	Yes
202210	Yes
202110	Yes
202080	Yes
201810	No
201980	No
202210	No
202080	Yes
201880	Yes
201910	Yes
202110	Yes
202210	No
202210	No

202110	Yes
202210	No
202210	No
202210	No
202180	Yes
202210	Yes
202210	No
202010	No
201910	No
202210	Yes
202210	No
202210	No
202210	Yes
202180	Yes
202080	No
202210	No
202010	No
202210	No
202180	No
202210	No
202210	No
202210	No
202010	No
202180	No
202150	No
202180	Yes
202210	No
202010	No
202210	No
202010	No
202010	No
202210	No
202010	No
202210	No
202010	No
202210	No

Appendix G

Institutional Review Board Approval

Date: 2-3-2022

IRB #: PRO-FY2022-200

Title: An Evaluation of College Administrators and Staff Educational Inclusion Practices for Undergraduate Students with Autism

Creation Date: 11-8-2021

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Kimberly Bracey

Review Board: University of Memphis

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved
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Key Study Contacts

Member	Wendy Griswold	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	wgrswold@memphis.edu
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Member	Kimberly Bracey	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	kvbracey@memphis.edu
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Member	Kimberly Bracey	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	kvbracey@memphis.edu
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