

WE HAVE THE SAME POTENTIAL: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS
OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

By

BARBARA KENNEDY

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2022

© 2022 Barbara Kennedy

To my eight participants for what they have taught me and for sharing their experiences and insight to help future students. They are amazing human beings who will make a difference in this world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my children Andy and Aubrey Johnson, who have been with me on this entire incredible journey. The patience and support that they showed for my efforts to continue with my educational pursuits were priceless. I am lucky to have them in my life.

I would also like to thank my fellow classmates, Dr. Shannon Sheppard, Dr. David Stout, and Dr. Jill Pettibone, as I would not have been able to make it through without their support, encouragement, humor, and advice. Thank you to the entire UF LEAD 2018 Cohort who have struggled through many changes and challenges, including a pandemic, and still made it to the other side.

Thank you to my colleagues at Eastern Florida State College who offered insight and inspiration and who share the passion for our students which motivated my research. Particularly, Associate Vice President of Student Support Services, Dr. Laura Sidoran, Associate Dean of Student Success and Support, Emily Tonn, Associate Dean of Student Life, Paola Moneymaker, and Assistant Director of Student Access for Improved Learning, Kathleen Simmons. These amazing individuals will assist me in making meaningful changes based on the outcomes of this research.

A special appreciation goes out to my Committee Chair, Dr. Kelli Peck Parrott, whose dedication to higher education has been an inspiration. Her unending support and guidance were critical in the completion of this research. And thanks to all my committee members, Dr. Tina Smith-Bonahue, Dr. Benjamin Thomas Skinner, and Dr. David Miller for taking the time out of their busy work environments to give invaluable suggestions and feedback.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	4
LIST OF TABLES.....	8
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	9
ABSTRACT.....	12
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	12
Statement of the Problem.....	17
Purpose of the Study.....	19
Research Questions.....	19
Significance of the Study.....	20
Definition of Terms.....	20
Chapter Summary.....	21
2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	22
History of Autism Spectrum Disorder.....	22
Prevalence and Progression.....	24
Unique Challenges for the Student with ASD.....	25
Student Perspectives.....	32
Equity and Accommodations.....	36
Retention and Graduation.....	41
Rationale.....	42
Chapter Summary.....	45
3 METHODOLOGY.....	46
Nature of Qualitative Research.....	46
Research Methods.....	47
Study Design.....	48
Participant Recruitment and Sampling.....	49
Data Collection.....	50
Role of the Researcher.....	51
Data Analysis.....	53
Goodness and Trustworthiness.....	54
Researcher Subjectivity Statement.....	56
Study Limitations.....	57
Chapter Summary.....	57

4	FINDINGS.....	59
	Participant and Interview Descriptions.....	60
	Brooklyn	61
	Cody.....	63
	Daniel.....	65
	Ian	66
	Jeremy.....	67
	Sophie	68
	Stephen.....	70
	Vanessa	71
	Data Analysis Process.....	72
	Emerging Concepts/Themes	72
	Determination	72
	Planning/Structure.....	76
	Adapting skills	78
	Utilizing Interests	81
	Parents/Family	83
	Student Life/Campus Activities.....	85
	Faculty Relationships	88
	Student Services	90
	Other Significant Findings.....	93
	Student Response to a Strengths-Based Approach	93
	Chapter Summary.....	95
5	DISCUSSION	96
	Research Question #1	96
	Determination	96
	Planning/Structure.....	98
	Adapting Skills.....	99
	Utilization of Interests	100
	Research Question #2	101
	Parents/Family	101
	Student Life Involvement.....	102
	Faculty Relationships	103
	Student Services	103
	Recommendations for Improved Practice.....	104
	Recommendation One	104
	Recommendation Two	107
	Recommendation Three.....	108
	Recommendation Four.....	109
	Recommendation Five	110
	Recommendation Six	110
	Recommendations for Further Research.....	111
	Recommendation One	112
	Recommendation Two	113

Recommendation Three	113
Recommendation Four	114
Recommendation Five	114
Limitations.....	115

ABSTRACT

A DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR 299.00 AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER	117
B SEVERITY LEVELS FOR AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER.....	120
C RECRUITMENT EMAIL.....	122
D INFORMED CONSENT	123
E INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	125
F THEME DEVELOPMENT	126
LIST OF REFERENCES	128
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	136

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>		<u>page</u>
4-1	Participant Breakdown.....	63

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APA	American Psychological Association.
AS	Asperger's Syndrome
ASC	Autism Spectrum Conditions
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CDC	Center for Disease Control
CS	Computer Science
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual
Dx.	Diagnosis
MAXQDA	Qualitative Data Analysis by Max Webber
MMR	Measles, Mumps, Rubella
PDD	Pervasive Developmental Disorder
USDE	United States Department of Education

Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

WE HAVE THE SAME POTENTIAL: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS
OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

By

Barbara Kennedy

August 2022

Chair: Kelli Peck Parrott

Major: Higher Education Administration

Over the past two decades there has been a significant increase in the number of college students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). While students with ASD have a grade point average that is higher than the national average, they have some of the worst outcomes related to success in college and maintaining employment when compared to neurotypical students or students with other disabilities. It is imperative that colleges and universities prepare for the increase in the ASD student population by determining the support needed to help this vulnerable population.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of community college students who have broken through the barriers they face as students with ASD and determine the internal and external factors that contributed to their success. This qualitative study implemented an appreciative inquiry approach with eight students who had successfully transferred from community college to a top-ranked research university. Data analysis revealed four themes related to internal factors that contributed to success at the community college level; determination, planning, adapting skills, and the utilization of interests. The themes related to external factors were family support, faculty support, student life involvement, and other student services (notably the office

of disabilities). Findings revealed that students were able to adapt by turning perceived deficits of their diagnosis into strengths; rigidity into determination, meticulousness into structure, and fixated interests into utilized interests. The study uncovered the benefits of using an appreciative inquiry approach with students with ASD, and the importance of the office of disabilities for more than just accommodations. Most importantly, the study highlights the unlocked potential of a growing population of community college students and gives recommendations on how to guide them towards success.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades there has been a significant increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD; Nurske, et al., 2019; Kuder & Accords, 2018; Anderson et al., 2017). As these children grow into adulthood and enter college, student affairs professionals have the difficult challenge of supporting success for this vulnerable and emerging population. Students with ASD have many challenges as evidenced by research (Anderson et al., 2017; Kuder & Archard, 2017); challenges that lead to poor degree completion rates and mental health concerns (United States Department of Education (USDE), 2019; Gellar et al., 2015). It is important to note that students with ASD are often brilliant with extraordinary talents (Bakker et al., 2020; Ousley & Cermak, 2014), suggesting discrepancies between potential and outcome.

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is identified by the presence of impaired social interaction, deficits in verbal and nonverbal communication, and restricted and repetitive behaviors and interests (American Psychological Association (APA), 2013). A thorough listing of the diagnostic criteria for ASD can be found in Appendix A. Prior to changes that occurred in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) in 2013, there were four disorders that were considered stand-alone disorders: autism, Asperger's syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified.

The 2013 revision of the DSM-5 put the stand-alone disorders under one autism spectrum disorder umbrella (APA, 2013). The term spectrum is used to denote the wide range of severity that can occur within the umbrella. The DSM-5 lists three severity levels (Appendix B). At the most severe end of the range (Level 3) individuals have

significant deficits that require a great deal of support; their ability to adapt both socially and communicatively is greatly impaired. They suffer from extreme difficulty in facing change and have extreme inflexibility of behaviors. The mid-range of severity (Level 2) requires substantial assistance, the same difficulties as Level 3 but to a lesser degree, and at the mild end of the range (Level 1) an individual requires support, but to a lesser degree than levels two or three (APA, 2013).

An individual with level one severity may experience normal or superior intelligence, social impairment, a lack of reciprocity in communication, idiosyncratic behaviors, sensory discomfort, repetitive behaviors, and appear to be over-focused on certain topics (APA, 2013). Individuals exhibiting these behaviors may likely have been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome before the changes in the DSM-5. It is a logical assumption that these are largely the students on the autism spectrum who enroll in our colleges and universities, based on the higher level of performance (Gellar et al., 2015). What is apparent is that with the numbers of students who have been diagnosed with ASD growing rapidly, measures need to be taken to prepare our colleges and universities. If colleges and universities are not prepared to meet the needs of these students with ASD, both the students and college graduation rates will likely suffer.

Children with ASD typically have difficulty in school but are often given accommodations and support throughout elementary and secondary schools (Highland, 2017). While there is a plethora of research conducted that provides insight for elementary and secondary age school children with ASD, the research for college age adults is sparse in comparison. This is disconcerting considering how many students will be entering college with a diagnosis of ASD in the coming years.

The most recent report from the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Network discovered that one in 44 eight-year-old children were identified with autism spectrum disorder in 2018 (Maenner et al., 2021). These rates have increased so significantly, we can expect an increasing demand for services in elementary and high schools, as well as colleges and universities. While students with ASD often have support in elementary and high school, when they enter college, there is a tendency to want to shed the label of a disability, and since they must advocate for themselves, many go without services or accommodations (Nurske et al., 2019). Studies have shown that students with ASD have some of the worst outcomes related to success in college and in getting and maintaining employment when compared to students with other disabilities (Roux et al., 2015a; Shattuck et al., 2012). It is imperative that research is done to determine services and practices that lead to success for students with ASD.

The Condition of Education is an annual report mandated by the United States Department of Education (2019) to summarize data on education across the nation. Data is obtained through surveys of students and teachers, and reports from state education agencies, K-12 schools, and colleges and universities. According to this report, the graduation rate for neurotypical students (students not effected by a disability) at the university level was 60%, almost double the rate for students with ASD. This fact is contradictory considering students with ASD have an average grade point average (GPA) of 3.27 with 80% of the participants having a GPA of 3.0 or higher (Gellar et al., 2015). Perhaps more emphasis needs to be on non-academic challenges for students with ASD. Studies that seek input from the students themselves are scarce but telling.

There have been a few recent studies that explore the student with ASD's perspective in why they struggle and what services best fit their needs. Anderson et al. (2019) found that most students believed registering with the office of disability services was a direct line to success. Accardo et al. (2019) found that students stressed the need for accommodations provided by the office of disability services and found lack of self-awareness as one of the largest barriers to success. The need to self-identify as a student with ASD was stressed in both studies. Self-identification refers to when a student will share with staff that they have a diagnosis of ASD which will enable them to benefit from accommodations in college (Nurske et al., 2019). The term is interchangeable with disclosure and is a turning point in much of the literature. Unfortunately, most students who have had services in elementary school and secondary school choose not to self-identify in college, which is imperative to gaining needed support services (Nurske et al., 2019; Elias & White, 2018).

Hendrickson et al. (2017) found that students with ASD "were less satisfied with their college experiences than other students, had more obstacles caused by nonacademic responsibilities, and believed there to be a bias against individuals with disabilities" (pg. 572). In looking at the research on the experiences of students with ASD, one can understand the extreme difficulty facing this population and see why, with rigid characteristics and inflexibility of thought (APA, 2013), giving up may be an option.

Nurske et al. (2019) speculated that students with ASD wanted to be free of the mental health label, but they also may lack the social and communication skills to advocate for themselves. Many students with ASD have genuinely concerned parents who have often been their child's sole advocate, taking away the need for the student to

advocate for themselves. Students may resist asking for help, and even if they do, there is controversy over whether the reasonable accommodations offered by the college are helping them (Cullen, 2015).

Typical services that fall under the category of reasonable accommodations for most students with a disability are extended time on tests, auxiliary aids such as interpreters and note takers, and adaptive equipment (Brown, 2017a). These services are academic in nature and based on the diagnosis and some self-reports, academics may not be the biggest challenge for students with ASD. Students surveyed consistently chose non-academic services such as counseling for depression and anxiety, and help with social skills, as a significant need (Accardo et al., 2019; Anderson & Butt, 2017; Gillespie-Lynch, 2017). Many universities have specialized programs specifically designed for students on the autism spectrum that include non-academic support services (Hillier et al., 2018); however, many students with ASD attend community colleges (Roux et al., 2015a). Roux et al. (2015a) reported nearly one in five students with ASD attend a two-year college only, and 9.2% more attend a community college for the first two years before going to the university. Unfortunately, much of the research available on college students with ASD seems to focus on university students.

To address this gap in the research, this study examines the experiences of community college students who self-identified as having ASD and have successfully transferred from a community college into a top-ranked public research university. The goal is to study their experiences and narratives to find common themes that have led to their success.

The use of an appreciative inquiry method of interviewing shifts the negative focus often seen in the research on students with ASD, to a positive focus. Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) stressed that people, both individually and collectively, have unique contributions and gifts to bring to life and highlight the benefits of using a strengths-based approach. Cooperrider et al. (2008) defined appreciative inquiry as, “Inviting people to participate in dialogues and share stories about their past and present achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths ...” (pg. 3).

The limitations of some of the research with students with ASD in qualitative studies point to challenges in keeping the participants engaged and willing to follow through with the study (Hillier et al., 2018). Students with ASD tend to be private and often distrustful, having often experienced negativity in social interactions (Myrvold, et al., 2021). The strengths-based approach in this study helped the students with ASD feel more empowered and encouraged them to share their stories.

Statement of the Problem

The number of students entering higher education with ASD is increasing at a compelling rate (Maenner et al., 2021; Nurske, et al., 2019; Kuder & Accardo, 2018). Each year approximately 50,000 adolescents who have been diagnosed with ASD turn 18 in the United States (Anderson, et al., 2018). With 80% of postsecondary students with ASD having a GPA of at least 3.0 we would expect a higher rate of success, but that is not the case (Gellar et al., 2015). It is imperative that colleges and universities prepare for the increase in the ASD student population by determining the support needed to help this vulnerable population succeed.

Students with ASD need non-academic support and opportunities to develop the skills to address the challenges that are standing in the way of their success. While the

research appears to highlight what programs and services the students see as beneficial, there has not been a focus on how successful students persist. Exploring the factors that lead to persistence for students with ASD could inform the higher education community on best practices for supporting this population and provide insight into program development.

Students with ASD often have extraordinary talents, some of which may include, hyperlexia (the ability to read beyond expectation levels based on age), enhanced perceptions in certain areas such as musical talent, excellent visual-spatial perception, and superior rote memory skills (Ousley & Cermak, 2013). Despite these talents, students with ASD have lower graduation rates in comparison to their neurotypical peers (Gellar et al., 2015). Research focused on the strengths and abilities, and the utilization of the same may offer insight to help students with ASD in the future.

A study conducted by Bakker et al. (2020) analyzed first-year progression and retention rates for students with ASD compared to their peers without a disability. The study found no difference in GPA, no difference in the average number of successful attempts in course completions, and no difference in retention rate after the first year of bachelor's degree studies. The study evidenced an ability in students with ASD that was the same as their fellow students with no diagnosis within the same field of study. The study suggested that students with ASD have a similar academic ability than their neurotypical peers, yet graduation and retention rates documented by the Department of Education show poor rates of success (USDE, 2019). This study sought to understand what successful students with ASD perceived as the external and internal factors that have led to their success. Learning how these participants were able to

break through the barriers to achieve success could go a long way to help support students with ASD in the future.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to analyze the subjective experiences of students who have been diagnosed with ASD and have overcome obstacles on their path to success in post-secondary education at the community college level. Research is scarce on the strengths of students with ASD, and narrative inquiry with this population is rare. There is a gap in the literature when it comes to firsthand experience of students on the autism spectrum, particularly those students who have been successful.

For this study success was defined as having successfully transferred from a community college into a top ranked public research university. The study was designed to fill gaps in the research when it comes to narrative experiences shared by students with ASD, specifically at the community college level. The study sought to identify the internal and external factors that impact the success of the community college student with ASD. A constructivist paradigm was used with a narrative inquiry method. Appreciative inquiry was used for questioning, as I felt that this population would respond more effectively to a positive approach, and there is little to no literature that focuses on community college students with ASD who have been successful.

Research Questions

To meet the research goal, the following research questions were studied:

- What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the internal factors that contribute to their success?
- What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the external factors that contribute to their success?

Significance of the Study

There appears to be an incongruency between the reported skill set of students on the autism spectrum and their ability to be successful in terms of college graduation. Understanding and analyzing the experiences and perceptions of students who have been able to beat the odds and move on to be accepted at a major university will benefit post-secondary institutions in planning programs, support services, and staff and faculty development. The long-term benefits could be an increase in retention and graduation rates for this growing population as well as benefits to the community and economy (Roux et al, 2015b).

Secondary institutions will benefit in helping students transition to college, in knowing what is beneficial, and learning what may help students with ASD overcome obstacles that get in the way of their success. With the rate of enrollment for college students with ASD significantly increasing (Maenner et al., 2021; Nurske, et al., 2019; Kuder & Accardo, 2018) student affairs professionals need tools to support their success. Studying the experiences of students who have been successful and getting their perspectives on what has led to their success can help ensure that future students' needs are met and potentially increase their possibility of success.

Definition of Terms

1. **Success:** For this study, a successful student is one who has successfully transferred from a community college and has been accepted into a top ranked public research university.
2. **Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):** The American Psychiatric Association (APA) defines people with ASD as having, "...communication deficits, such as responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions, or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age. In addition, people with ASD may be overly dependent on routines, extremely sensitive to changes in their environment, or intensely focused on inappropriate items. Again, the symptoms of people with ASD will fall on a continuum, with some individuals

showing mild symptoms and others having much more severe symptoms” (APA, 2013, para.4).

3. Neurotypical: not effected with a developmental disorder and especially autism spectrum disorder, exhibiting or characteristic of typical neurological development (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).
4. Appreciative Inquiry - A qualitative method designed to analyze the challenges facing a community or population, and discover what solutions are working in the environment (Moody, et al., 2019).
5. Masking – Masking, as defined by Hull, et al. (2017) “encompasses the aspects of camouflaging that focus on hiding one’s ASC [autism spectrum condition] characteristics and developing different personas or characters to use during social situations” (pg. 2519).

Chapter Summary

This study sought to gain an understanding of the perceptions of successful students with ASD and their experiences as community college students, specifically the internal and external factors that contributed to their success. With the growth rate of this population of college students, the data is helpful to colleges and universities as they develop programs and supports that lead to success. Chapter 2 will present a review of the literature, to include a brief history of ASD, the prevalence and progression of ASD, the challenges that students with ASD face, equity and accommodations for students with ASD, and retention and graduation rates for students with ASD.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The number of students entering higher education with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is increasing at an exponential rate (Maenner et al., 2021; Nurske, et al., 2019; Kuder & Accardo, 2018). It is imperative that colleges and universities prepare for the ASD student population increase by determining the student support needs that will best serve them. An absence of knowledge on what best fits their needs and is a factor in their success, will lead to continued breakdown of a population of students with much potential.

The following chapter explores the literature relevant to the diagnosis and history of autism spectrum disorder, along with the prevalence and progression of the disorder. Perceptions of college students on the autism spectrum are explored as well as a review of literature related to the unique challenges for students on the autism spectrum. A summary featuring gaps in the research helps to justify the need for research exploring the experiences and perceptions of successful students with ASD.

History of Autism Spectrum Disorder

The two researchers most known for being trailblazers in the discovery of autism are Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger. While both men used the term 'autistic,' it was not the first time this word was introduced. Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler was the first to use the term in relationship with schizophrenia (Lyons & Fitzgerald, 2007). It was Hans Asperger who first discussed the unique and often extraordinary gifts that many autistic children possessed. It was not until 1981 that an author by the name of Lorna Wing, who had momentous contributions to the understanding and research of autism, coined the term 'Asperger's Syndrome', through the translation of Hans Asperger's work. He

saw these individuals having met the criteria for autism, but with high functioning skills and unique talents (Wolf, 2004).

There were many myths regarding autism that permeated the field for decades. Some of these myths included the idea of cold parents who offered little love and affection, while some saw autism as a psychotic disorder rather than a developmental disorder. This issue is still being debated, along with rumors about the possible cause of autism through the MMR vaccination (Davidson, 2017: Wolf, 2004).

Autism was first introduced in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) third edition in 1980 as Infantile Autism (APA, 1980), and revised in 1987 under Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD) in the DSM-III-R (APA, 1987). It was not until 1989 that Asperger's Syndrome (AS) was labeled and listed in the DSM-IV (APA, 1994) as a stand-alone diagnosis under PDD. Children who experienced symptom-like behavior of autism prior to the 1980's were typically labeled with childhood schizophrenia (Rosen, Lord, & Volkmar, 2021). Since autism was not included in the DSM until 1980, it is seen as a relatively new diagnosis. And while there is much more research in the study of autism in general, research on high functioning autism is much more recent. In fact, prior to 1993, there were less than 100 studies published on the topic of Asperger's Syndrome (Rosen, Lord, & Volkmar, 2021).

A controversial change was made with the fifth edition of the DSM, when AS was folded into the category of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), removing the presentation of PDD, and adding specifiers of severity and cognitive and language impairments. This edition also added unusual sensory responses/interests into the criteria (APA, 2013). Prior to this fifth edition of the DSM, symptom onset had to be

before the age of three. The change was brought about due to an awareness that symptoms could occur later in life, based on life experience and social demands (Rosen, Lord, & Volkmar, 2021).

With the multiple changes to the DSM 5, many feared that individuals who would have met the criteria for AS or PPD prior to the change to the DSM 5, would not meet the criteria for the new classification, and therefore be denied services (Rosen, Lord, & Volkmar, 2021). However, this does not appear to be the case as the diagnosis has been increasingly more common following the 2013 changes (Nurske, et al., 2019).

Prevalence and Progression

The progression of autism among college and university students is quite significant. Hendrickson, et al., (2017) stated, “students with autism spectrum disorders are attending post-secondary programs at unprecedented rates” (pg. 571). There is a multitude of research pointing to significant increases in the diagnosis of autism spectrum in young adults (Maenner et al., 2021; Nurske, et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2018; Rando et al., 2016; Cullen, 2015; Grogan, 2015; Shmulsky et al., 2015).

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention conducts a yearly report, utilizing eleven sites across the US that have been identified as the autism and developmental disabilities monitoring (ADDM) network. The most recent report discovered that one in 44 eight-year-old children were identified with an autism spectrum disorder in 2018 (Maenner et al., 2021). The Research presented by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention the prior year stated that in the 2016 one in 54 eight-year-old children were diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, 2.5 times higher than the 2000 report. The numbers continue to increase, and those eight-year-old children from the 2016

report will be college-age by 2225. It is important for colleges and universities to be able to meet the needs of these individuals.

Roux et al. (2015a) reported nearly one in five students on the autism spectrum attend a two-year college only, and 9.2% more attend a community college for the first two years before going to the university. When asked if they had ever attended a community college, 70% of students who participated in the *National Autism Indicators Report* (Roux, et al, 2015b) said they had. However, most programs for students on the autism spectrum are housed at the university level. This fact is unfortunate as two-year colleges often serve as a scaffold toward a four-year degree (Roux et al., 2015a).

Colclough (2018) stressed the importance and concern over the fact that students on the autism spectrum are attending two-year colleges at an increasing rate, yet individualized support services addressing their unique needs on community college campuses are scarce. The author pleaded for institutions to prepare for and respond to this diverse student population that is on the rise. Once a student with ASD has attended a two-year college and had an unpleasant experience, the likelihood of them transitioning to the university, or entering the workforce decreases drastically due to their unique challenges and characteristics (Colclough, 2018).

Unique Challenges for the Student with ASD

According to the DSM-5, “The essential features of autism spectrum disorder are persistent impairment in reciprocal social communication and social interaction, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities” (American Psychological Association, 2013, pg. 52). These behaviors, in a new college environment without a familiar support system may cause remarkable challenges for the ASD student. While transition from high school to college has proven to be a challenge

for many students (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013), for a student with ASD challenges with transition may prove to be significant (Alverson et al., 2019).

Students who have been diagnosed with ASD may have a myriad of challenges such as difficulty with abstract concepts, short attention span, information processing struggles, difficulties understanding body language or facial expressions, insufficient time management and organization skills, and frustrations with sensory input overload, that could impact their ability to succeed (McKeon et al., 2013). Perhaps most troubling for students with ASD are the non-academic challenges that impact learning in a significant way. Difficulties and impairment with social interaction between fellow classmates and instructors can be devastating to an individual suffering from ASD. Students on the spectrum have difficulty with reciprocity in communication, and they are often off-putting to other students due to their obsessive and restrictive thought processes. While students with autism spectrum disorders are typically not malicious or unkind, they often come across as rude and inflexible, and have little self-awareness as to how they are being perceived (Rando, et al., 2016).

The difficulties with sensory input are often debilitating for students with ASD. Colcough (2018) conducted a qualitative study that asked students with ASD about their experience with social engagement on the community college campus and most students said they chose not to partake in campus-based social activities because of the noise level and social anxiety around crowds. At the same time, they had an awareness of the importance of such activities and a desire to become involved. Anderson et al. (2018) found related results when over half of the students in their

qualitative study shared that sensory sensitivities hindered both their ability to study and their overall ability to cope in the campus environment.

Particularly challenging for students with ASD is the transition from high school to college life. College can be much less structured, and more subjective which may cause concern and discomfort for a student who has difficulty navigating change (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Rando, et al., 2016; Quaye & Harper, 2015). Students may also be dealing with maneuvering through the system on their own for the first time. Most students with a diagnosis of ASD have had multiple supports in high school, and 24/7 emotional support from parents (Cullen, 2015). When these students enter college, they have the opportunity to shed the label that they have lived with for years, and many do, choosing not to disclose their diagnosis (Anderson et al., 2017). The sudden lack of support, coupled with a deficiency in social skills and communication (APA, 2013) make it exceedingly difficult to function, and often leads to overwhelming feelings of loneliness and isolation (Hendrickson, et al., 2017).

Students with ASD often suffer with anxiety and depression along with the possibility of other psychiatric conditions (Bolourian, et al., 2018; Cox et al., 2017). Roux et al. (2015b) reported that 60% of the young people with ASD surveyed had at least two health or mental health issues in addition to struggling with ASD. Jackson et al. (2018) conducted a study with 56 adults with ASD in post-secondary academic institutions and found that 57.1% of the participants had at least one co-occurring psychiatric diagnosis, and 75% of the participants reported some form of suicidal behavior, with 14.6% of those having made previous suicidal attempts. Many students reported that some of the mental health issues are directly related to their ability to fit in

on a college campus and their perceived judgement by others regarding their behaviors (Roux et al., 2015a).

Students on the autism spectrum often have fascinations and rigid routines surrounding hyper- or hypo-reactivity to the senses, often resulting in odd mannerisms (APA, 2013). For example, individuals with ASD may experience challenges in processing and interpreting smells, taste, tactile experiences, auditory experiences, or visual stimuli (American Psychological Association, 2013). In the classroom this may be evidenced by behaviors such as sniffing hands or paper, staring intently at a moving object or person, an avoidance or an aversion to sounds or certain textures or materials, and self-stimulatory behavior such as flapping of hands, tapping of pulse points on the body, or pacing (APA, 2013; Sensory Differences, n.d.). These personal attributes that students with ASD bring with them, make it exceedingly difficult to integrate successfully, especially at a time when identifying with peers, and exhibiting appropriate social behaviors are so important (Cullen, 2015).

Anderson and Butt (2017) conducted a study with diverse students with ASD and found that 11% had dropped out of college, and 17% were forced to move back home after having a crisis in college. They pointed out that often college staff and faculty are unaware of the challenges of these students who are academically gifted. This was further supported by Gurbuz et al. (2017), when students described a feeling of misunderstanding among professors and neurotypical classmates which led to a lack of motivation to develop social relationships, and a tendency toward mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. A substantial portion of the students with ASD in the

Gurbuz et al. (2017) study reported that they had considered dropping out of college. They also reported difficulties in academic pursuits due to group work, perfectionism, poor processing speed, poor time management, and inadequate organizational skills. These challenges are often something that students suffer with in silence, unseen by those who could assist.

Autism spectrum disorders are exceptional in that they are often considered an invisible disability which offers unique challenges. Students with ASD will not have the same experience as students with visible impairments. With 70% of students on the spectrum having average to above-average intelligence and no visually obvious impairment, the expectations for students with ASD may be high, leaving them with a high likelihood of being misperceived or misunderstood (Brown, 2017a; Hendrickson et al., 2017).

While students on the spectrum are not typically aggressive or dangerous, they can cause problems in the classroom with poor impulse control, a very blunt and literal way of speaking, and an intolerance for another person's opinion or behavior. It is difficult for them to understand how their actions are affecting others. Because of their inability to read social cues, their actions are often misinterpreted as being too forward and often disrespectful (Brown, 2017a; Hendrickson et al., 2017).

The student with ASD may not realize that a behavior is not acceptable, such as asking personal questions, discussing inappropriate topics, or topics proposed out of context. While institutions post code of conduct rules and regulations, the student with ASD may have a challenging time understanding the rules if they are vague and non-specific (Miele et al., 2018). When students are met with disciplinary sanctions, they

may not be able to understand what they have done wrong and feel misunderstood and defeated. These feelings may lead to dropping out and giving up as individuals with ASD often shut down in the face of adversity (Accardo, et al., 2019; Anderson & Butt, 2017).

In a report from Gellar et al. (2015) students with ASD admitted to feeling oppressed. Twenty-six percent of the students in the study reported experiencing discrimination based on their disability. One student said they were “the joke of the dorm” (pg. 49), another said they were “told by the disability service office that they should quit getting an associate degree and work on getting a certificate” (pg. 49). Negative experiences such as the ones reported by Gellar et al. (2015) may lead students to conceal their disorder.

Self-advocating can be difficult, especially for students who have communication barriers. Roux et al. (2015b) reported that one in four young adults with ASD are truly isolated, as indicated by their report of not seeing or talking with friends or being invited to a social event within the past year. However, they ranked social isolation last when asked what the most difficult outcome of the transition to college was. First on the list was not being able to live independently.

Cox et al. (2017) found that many students on the autism spectrum choose not to identify with an autism spectrum disorder, and cited examples where students rejected the diagnosis following negative feedback from peers and faculty. Even when students did disclose, “...their comments also revealed an internal tension regarding the way autism fit into their own sense of identity” (pg. 79). It is unsure whether students on the autism spectrum do not self-identify because they do not have the ability to reach out, or

because they are choosing not to, but the reality is, many do not (Elias & White, 2018; Nurske et al., 2019).

Most students on the autism spectrum have had accommodations in high school and parental and administrative support, working collaboratively to help the student succeed (Nurske et al., 2019; Brown, 2017b). College presents a unique situation in that students are treated as adults for possibly the first time in their lives. Separation from this safe support system may be traumatic for students with ASD. Support and tolerance within higher education from staff, faculty and fellow students can be inconsistent, if not unpredictable. For some students, the independence is traumatic, for other students it is a way to lose a label that they have carried for years. The result can be a refusal to self-report, leaving the student lost (Cox et al., 2017). One reason for rejecting the diagnosis may be due to attitudinal barriers.

Quaye and Harper (2015) discussed attitudinal barriers that may exist on college campuses. Faculty may have negative reactions towards students who ask for accommodations, believing that they lower standards and weaken academic integrity. Cage et al. (2019) found that neurotypical people tend to dehumanize those who are on the autism spectrum. Stronach et al. (2019) found comparable results when looking at understanding and stigma towards individuals on the autism spectrum. In their study the indicators for most understanding and least amount of stigma towards those on the autism spectrum were gender (women were both more understanding and less likely to stigmatize than men), exposure to those on the autism spectrum (individuals who had experienced ASD on a personal level were more understanding), and higher levels of education (higher levels of education meant a higher level of understanding).

Students on the autism spectrum are not only struggling with their own internal challenges, but also the challenges that occur due to attitudes from staff, faculty, and fellow classmates. Brown (2017a) discussed the link between research and practice and suggested that many institutions were missing the mark on helping students with ASD, “ASD-specific policies and programs that are developed on a lack of knowledge or stereotypical, pop-culture assumptions empowers ableism and creates hostile environments” (pg. 142). Listening to student perspectives is essential in gaining a true understanding of the experience of students with ASD.

Student Perspectives

Studies have clearly shown that students with ASD continue to struggle despite their often-high intellect, and accommodations that are offered to them (Myrvold, et al., 2021; Accardo, et al., 2019; Bolourian, et al., 2018; Lizotte, 2018). There has been minimal research on student perceptions of accommodations and experiences in college, with a slight increase within the last few years. Many of these reports come from students at the university level, not the community college level.

A qualitative study conducted by Anderson and Butt (2017) found four emerging themes when interviewing 18 students with ASD and their families: preparation beyond academics: student/college fit, campus supports, and family supports. Students reported that the need for preparation prior to college was essential. The transition from high school to college was extremely difficult for the students and they stressed a need for campus orientation tours, pre-college transition programs, and participation in individual planning in high school.

Students also reported that mental health issues, social deficits, life skills training, and immaturity were not addressed sufficiently in high school, leaving students

alone and ill-equipped. “Celebrating academic success while ignoring other issues sometimes led to failure at college” (Anderson & Butt, 2017, p. 3033). They also found that students often fared better in a community college setting as there was often more flexibility and smaller class sizes. Issues of housing presented problems at the university level, not only due to social deficits, but also the issue of feeling trapped by financial obligations and housing leases. The central issue with campus supports was that services had to be prompted by the student who often chose not to self-disclose or lacked the communication skills to ask for help. Parental support seemed to be an issue in that students were acclimated to having a lot of support in high school, yet in college (particularly university) settings, the lessening of parental support left many students feeling depressed, alone, and sometimes suicidal (Anderson & Butt, 2017).

Anderson, et al., (2017) surveyed 59 university students with autism and found that they saw themselves as having many strengths: attention to detail, technological skills, original and creative thoughts, a strong memory, and consistency. They saw their challenges as more non-academic, such as an elevated level of anxiety, and sensitivity to noise, light, and smells. When asked about support services, the researchers found that many students did not use support services at all, and those who did, used them only occasionally. They reported the lack of self-advocacy skills as a major weakness and inhibitor to receiving services.

Bolourian, et al. (2018) sought to understand the perspectives of students on the autism spectrum in a qualitative study that explored the experiences of 13 university students diagnosed with ASD and found that students desired to be given the chance to excel in college without the stigma attached to a label given to them in high school.

They believed that professors would see them as less capable and isolate them from their classmates. They also indicated that they were aware that others more than likely knew of their differences and admitted that there was a negative impact on academics, yet they desired to remain anonymous rather than ask for help or connect with support services. Many students stated that the academic and social environment of higher education triggered mental health issues. Primary problems were academic demands from faculty, feeling contempt from peers, and difficulties with housing.

Lizotte (2018) had similar findings when interviewing students on the autism spectrum. The students in that study had a diverse set of experiences from two-year technical colleges to university settings. Themes that emerged were challenges in academics, sensory concerns, and problems with communicating with others. Also, compatible with other studies, the author found that students were apprehensive about disclosing their disability and had trouble advocating for themselves. Engaging with peers was a major struggle for most and they feared rejection from faculty. Those who chose to use the accommodations provided from their college or university found them to be helpful. It was interesting to note that the non-academic support services were not found to be as helpful to the students as the academic services. Academic support services were voted as most helpful (65%), and testing accommodations (such as longer time on tests) as second most helpful. Only 40% of the respondents nominated non-academic support services as being helpful at all; of those who saw the benefit, there were mixed results. Engaging with a disability support coordinator was second on the list of most helpful as well as second on the list of least helpful. Counseling services

was chosen as being the most helpful non-academic service (15%) and orientation week as least helpful (12.5%).

These data conflict with earlier findings that highlighted students' perception of the importance of orientation/transition programs (Anderson & Butt, 2017). When students were asked to discuss their challenges and strengths, students reported strengths in academic areas and challenges in non-academic areas such as loneliness, social difficulties, anxiety and depression, and sensory concerns. Another prominent factor which was consistent with other findings, was the lack of desire, or inability to reach out for help. The students in the study reported that they only accessed a few of the services provided and only occasionally (Lizotte, 2018).

Accardo, et al., (2019) conducted a two-year study that investigated college perspectives of students with ASD on accommodations and support services in a public university setting. The findings showed that the accommodations preferred by the students were extra time on tests, priority registration, and receiving a copy of instructor notes. The services described as most valuable were housing accommodations and extra time on tests. When asked which support services were most frequently used, the students favored academic coaching (91%), writing center services (57%), and summer transition programs (70%). Counseling services and faculty mentoring were chosen by 48% of the students interviewed as valuable to their success. Interestingly, students chose the non-academic support services such as peer mentoring (39%) and social skills groups (35%) as least preferred.

College students with ASD are suffering as evidenced by their reports in the research (Accardo et al., 2019; Bolourian, et al., 2018; Colcough, 2018; Lizotte, 2018;

Anderson & Butt, 2017). The reports signify loneliness, anxiety, depression, and struggles with communication, yet the presence of a clear belief in academic ability. Self-disclosure is a significant issue and for those students who are registering with a disability office, less than half use the accommodations offered to them (Anderson et al., 2017); Roux et al., 2015b). Accommodations are meant to help a student succeed to the best of their ability.

Gellar et al. (2015) utilized a survey method approach to analyze the experiences of students with ASD who were in college or who had graduated from college. Thirty-five students completed the online survey that discussed academic success, social success, and disclosure. They found that individuals with ASD enjoyed academic success but struggled with the social aspects of college life. They also found that many of the accommodations offered to students with ASD could in fact be detrimental. For instance, single room accommodations and quiet spaces to study may help ease anxiety but may further isolate students. Disclosure of the diagnosis was difficult for many, but a trusted staff or faculty member increased the likelihood of reaching out for help (Gellar, et al., 2015). Students cannot be helped if they do not accept the services or if the services that are offered do not impact the major challenges these students face.

Equity and Accommodations

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 asks for the development of models to advocate for inclusion for students with disabilities, and demands full participation (McKeon et al., 2013). Section 504 of this act prohibits programs, including employers and institutions that are receiving federal funding, from discriminating against an individual based on their disability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). The Americans with

Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits institutions from discriminating against any individual who meets the qualification of a disability, and it mandates institutions to give individuals access to accommodations that will give them equal access to educational programs and services.

In 2008 there was an amendment that returned to a broader definition of the term disability and decreased the amount of documentation that students had to provide to establish eligibility criteria (Brown, 2017b). While institutions are required to offer reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities, the definition of reasonable is debatable. There are no specific requirements or guidelines that are mandated. Services that typically fall under the category of reasonable are adaptive equipment, prolonged time limits on exams, and auxiliary aids such as note takers (Brown, 2017a). Extended time on tests and auxiliary aids may be beneficial to students with ASD, but many believe the most crucial needs are not being met (Brown, 2017a; Hendrickson et al., 2017; White et al., 2016).

Accardo (2017) conducted a study capturing the perceptions of students on the autism spectrum with regards to barriers to success. The themes that emerged from the study were predominantly non-academic. They reported anxiety due to change, doubts regarding self-disclosure, information processing deficits, mental health issues, and social challenges as major obstacles. While poor study skills were reported in 36% of the student respondents, they did not mention deficits in academic abilities.

Brown and Coomes (2016) found that only 36.3% of two-year institutions offered sensory accommodation to students on the autism spectrum, yet Colcough (2018) shared that students report they fail to engage in activities and services due to their

sensory difficulties, and anxiety over large crowds. While Colocough's (2018) report focused on campus engagement, Gurbuz, et al. (2019) looked at sensory overload when it came to academic success in the classroom. Students reported that increase in anxiety over sensory overload and sensitivity to change resulted in an inability to focus and process information in the classroom. Students reported that they were overwhelmed by the crowded lectures and the resulting noise level. Many of the students in this study also reported a lack of awareness when it came to their individual needs, and an unwillingness to report.

Access to academic support in college depends on the student's ability to self-report, coming at a time when many students on the spectrum are finding joy in losing the stigma associated with a diagnosis. In addition to fear of stigma, students with ASD report that they prefer to be alone, are apprehensive about the benefits of support, and have had traumatic experiences when they have reached out for help in the past (Anderson et al., 2017). Cullen (2015) stressed how a student's experience and lack of awareness cause them to reject services to avoid carrying an old label. Many students are longing for a desire to be considered normal and many may have a lack of insight into their own limitations (Nurske et al., 2019; Someki et al., 2018). The fear of stigma that may lead to an absence of self-reporting, coupled with accommodations that may not be helpful, lends itself to problems with academic integration. If a student on the autism spectrum, who is typically academically sound, begins to fail, the impact on their self-esteem, goals, and intentions may be profound.

Brown (2017a) conducted a national survey that analyzed services provided to students with ASD from 146 public two-year institutions, 158 public four-year

institutions, and 165 private four-year institutions. The findings showed that most services provided to students with ASD were academic. The study found that 77% offered note takers, 72% offered faculty-provided course notes and assignments, 72% offered help with study skills, 71% offered alternative testing formats, and 70% offered adaptive technology. Brown and Coomes (2016) conducted a survey specifically highlighting two-year public institutions and found comparable results, stating that reasonable accommodations with a clear focus on academics were most often offered to students with ASD. In this survey it was reported that 95% of the 367 institutions surveyed offered note takers, extended time on exams, audio recordings, or alternative locations for testing. Services that were specific to the student with ASD were uncommon (Brown & Coomes, 2016).

One study that analyzed the perceptions of 28 families who had college students with ASD is both interesting and disheartening. Camarena and Sarigiani (2009) stressed the concerns that parents and college students with ASD have for the ability of institutions to meet their needs, and a needed focus on non-academic services. The authors stressed that all three groups, mothers, fathers, and students with ASD, listed the most pressing concern for succeeding in college was the “capacity to function or be accepted socially,” this consistently outweighed distress related to resources, academic skills, or available accommodations (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009, pg. 123). They also noted that there was a significant increase in the diagnosis of these disorders. And indeed, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported an almost fourfold increase in autism related disorders from 1997–1999 to 2006–2008 (CDC, 2013). Today, articles are stating the same concerns with a diagnostic rate of one in 44

(Maenner, et al., 2021). There has been awareness of this growing population, yet very little has been done to dig deep into the experiences of the individuals to help alleviate the concern and support success for the students with ASD.

Much research supports that traditional means of academic support may be inadequate to meet the needs of students with significant social and communicative deficits (Gurbuz et al., 2019; Brown, 2017a; Brown & Coomes, 2016; Hendrickson et al., 2017; White et al., 2016). With the lack of governmental guidelines, the accommodations provided by institutions are at the discretion of the staff member assigned that task. It is also up to the student to request accommodations, this from a student who may have difficulties with social interaction, and who may never have had to ask for the services on their own (Brown, 2017a). While colleges and universities offer accommodations for students with documented ASD, the question becomes, are these services leading them to success?

Anderson et al. (2017) found that many students did not use the accommodations that were allotted to them, and an overwhelming amount only used them occasionally. That same report found students were more satisfied with the academic support versus the non-academic support. The authors surmised that part of this perception could be due to the student's lack of awareness of the need for non-academic support services and the relative ease that many students on the spectrum have with academic endeavors. The non-academic support services such as peer mentoring services, social skills training, and workshops related to social interactions may cause anxiety and lead to avoidance of those services. While most participants in

the study claimed that the academic supports were successful, they continued to have difficulties, and many had thoughts of dropping out.

Retention and Graduation

Gellar, et al. (2015) reported a high degree of academic achievement for students with ASD with an average GPA of 3.27. One would assume that with this average GPA, students in this population would be successful. With an enrollment rate of 47%, students on the autism spectrum enroll in post-secondary institutions at a lower rate than their neurotypical classmates, or their classmates with other disabilities (White et al., 2016; Sandford et al., 2011). Gellar et al. (2015) found that outcomes for students with ASD were “among the worst transition outcomes of any disability group” (pg. 45). Anderson et al. (2017) reported similar findings, stating that students on the autism spectrum have the lowest graduation rate (39%) compared to the general student population or students with other disabilities.

The A.J. Drexel Autism Institute is a research organization that seeks to address the challenges of autism spectrum disorders. In the *National Autism Indicators Report* (Roux et al, 2015a) college students with ASD reported a high rate of disconnection (37%) when compared to other students with disabilities (8%). Disconnection was defined as never getting a job or moving on to higher education. The report also determined that 58% of youth with autism spectrum disorders worked outside of the home from high school to their early 20's, a rate far lower than students with other disabilities. When students with ASD are employed, they tend to get paid at lower rates (White et al., 2016; Roux et. al, 2015a). Students on the autism spectrum have the lowest average rate of pay compared to all students with disabilities except for those diagnosed with mental retardation (Sanford, et al., 2011). Students on the autism

spectrum have difficulties with independence. Sanford, et al. (2011) reported that only 12% of adults with ASD were living independently. This rate is lower than adults with mental retardation, deaf-blind adults, and all other adults diagnosed with anything other than multiple disabilities (Sandford et al., 2011). Roux et al. (2015a) reported a slight increase (19%) in the rate of students on the autism spectrum who are living independently, but this number is still significantly lower than young adults with other disabilities. These young adults also have the lowest rate of friendship interactions than all categories of disabilities (Sandford, et al., 2011). It is critical that something is done to help these struggling young people.

The question of whether colleges and universities are adequately assisting students on the autism spectrum is one that needs to be explored. Many of these students are struggling on their own, without adequate support services and extremely poor communication skills. These challenges may seem overwhelming and uncompromising, triggering students to give up and drop out. Successful students with ASD have found a way to overcome this myriad of challenges and may have insight to help those that are still struggling.

Rationale

Many researchers point to the fact that there is a gap between the increasing number of college students with ASD and the services that are provided for them (Brown, 2017a; Brown, 2017b; Cullen, 2015; McKeon, et al.,2013). There is minimal research investigating the effectiveness of non-academic services provided to students with ASD, but the research that is available, supports the benefits of transition programs (Brown, 2017a; Brown, 2017b; Cullen, 2015; McKeon, et al.,2013), mentoring programs

(Brown, 2017a; Rando, et al., 2016; Cullen, 2015), and career counseling (Brown, 2017a, Cullen, 2015) as being most successful and beneficial to students with ASD.

When analyzing data from qualitative reports from students with ASD, they reported finding academic support services as most helpful, as opposed to non-academic services such as mentoring, social skills training, and group training. They did, however, rank counseling and faculty interaction as beneficial (Accardo, et al., 2019; Bolourian, et al., 2018; Colcough, 2018; Lizotte, 2018; Anderson & Butt, 2017). There appears to be a discrepancy in what researchers are claiming that students with ASD need, and what the students see as beneficial. Research on the perceptions of the successful college student, may help resolve some of the conflicting reports in the research. Focusing on both internal and external forces that have led to success for the college student with ASD benefits program development and gives integral insight into current and future support services, taking into consideration the college student's viewpoint.

While there is a lot of literature on prevalence rates and challenges for students with ASD, there is little empirical literature on the experience of individuals on the autism spectrum in post-secondary education, especially at the community college level. Since many students with ASD are attending community colleges (Roux et al., 2015a; Roux et al., 2015b) and students find community college settings most beneficial (Anderson & Butt, 2017), more research needs to focus on the community college student on the autism spectrum, and how to enhance current non-academic support services. Many two-year colleges offer supports that were originally designed for

students with other disabilities (Brown and Coomes, 2016). The effectiveness of these support services on a population that is so diverse may be questionable.

There is a lack of research on the strengths of college students on the autism spectrum. There is minimal research on academic successes of the student with ASD, which would be helpful in building programs that may be of interest. A more positive approach to helping those with ASD could begin to give hope for institutions and promote an increase in awareness.

It is important that colleges and universities go beyond what is required by the law to help students on the autism spectrum as this population is growing and students with ASD have many gifts to offer that are under-utilized. There seems to be a discrepancy in what researchers find to be most beneficial based on challenges to the student with ASD, and what the students find to be most valuable to them. As the numbers with this population continue to grow, institutions must prepare themselves to serve this unique group of students in a way that is equitable, compassionate, and leads to higher rates of retention and graduation. More research is warranted from a student perspective to clarify needs of the student on the autism spectrum.

The contradictory nature of some of the research findings points to a need for the student's perspective, and an analysis of the same. While quantitative statistics are showing inconsistency between student ability and student success, and a need for non-academic accommodations, student report from recent data suggests that students find academic support services more valuable than non-academic support services (Accardo, et al., 2019; Bolourian, et al., 2018; Colcough, 2018; Lizotte, 2018). Students also report a desire for more one-to-one contact with faculty members (Accardo, et al,

2019) which may help to alleviate the fears that some have of ridicule and stigmatization. This may also speak to the needs that Anderson and Butt (2017) pointed out for faculty to become more aware of the disorder.

Zeedyk et al. (2019) found that faculty were willing to learn more about students on the autism spectrum, but they had limited knowledge and awareness, and some were overwhelmed with the information provided. Studies suggest that experience with students on the autism spectrum lends toward faculty that serve them more effectively (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Since it has been reported that students only occasionally use accommodations, even when they are registered with the office of disabilities, educators should look at alternative ways to help students on the autism spectrum.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature related to students on the autism spectrum, to include a discussion on the prevalence and progression of this disorder, unique challenges that students on the autism spectrum face, equitable accommodations, and student perspectives. Due to the continued growth in this student population, and the low success rate, it is the responsibility of educators to explore what student support services are most beneficial to the students with ASD, and how students with ASD can best be supported and encouraged by the institution, giving them the tools they need to be successful. Chapter 3 will describe the methodology, the research design, and the procedures proposed for the study that serves to abide by this responsibility.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a brief overview of the research methods, data collection and analysis, goodness and trustworthiness, researcher subjectivity, and limitations of this study. Using a constructivist perspective, this narrative inquiry documented the experiences, backgrounds, and the insights of students who self-identified as having an autism spectrum disorder. The overall purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experience of students on the autism spectrum who were successful; specifically, those who successfully transferred from a community college into a top ranked research university. The study explores their perceptions of the internal and external contributors that led to their success.

Nature of Qualitative Research

According to Bernard and Ryan (2010) “the four goals of qualitative research are to explore, describe, compare, and test models” (pg. 8). This qualitative study offers relevant, genuine, lived experiences that the participants have shared, to add authenticity and credibility to data. Common characteristics of qualitative research are looking at how people interpret and apply meaning to their life situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) discussed having a questioning stance, a high tolerance for ambiguity, being a careful observer and questioner, thinking inductively, and having comfort in writing, as key competencies for the qualitative researcher. My experience as a counselor, professor, and administrator were advantageous, especially when working with this vulnerable population.

Existing research shows that students with ASD are struggling (Accardo, et al., 2019; Bolourian, et al., 2018; Lizotte, 2018; Anderson & Butt, 2017). Discovering what

successful students have done to persist and complete is powerful. Only the students themselves can answer that question. While most studies focus on challenges of the student on the autism spectrum, this qualitative study focused on their successes.

Qualitative methodology was beneficial with the goal of hearing and interpreting the experiences of successful students with ASD and taking note of the internal and external factors that lead to their success. It was important for me to help the reader understand who the participants were as not just students with ASD, but individuals unique in their own way, yet also similar. One factor that tied them together was often feeling misunderstood. The research suggested this (Brown, 2017a; Hendrickson et al., 2017), as did the participants in this study. I had a goal of helping to understand these incredible students, while answering crucial questions that could serve to help develop programs, initiatives, and revise practices at the community college to aid in the growth of this growing population.

Research Methods

To meet the research goal, the following research questions were studied:

- What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the internal factors that contribute to their success?
- What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the external factors that contribute to their success?

This study explored the participants' experiences, through their construction of meaning. As noted by Miriam and Tisdell (2016) meaning is constructed not created, based on their interactions with the world. Constructionism is particularly relevant to this research study, as students with autism spectrum disorder are unique in that their perceptions of themselves and the world may be quite different from what is considered

the norm (Anderson & Butt, 2017). I was careful not to impose inferences or judgement, but to listen to the truths of the participants and make meaning of those individual truths as opposed to my preconceived ideas of their truth. The interest was in how the students interpreted their experiences, how their world was constructed, and the meaning that was attributed to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1994), “A paradigm . . . represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the ‘world,’ the individuals place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that work and its parts” (pg. 107). Within the context of understanding the experiences of students on the autism spectrum, my view is that each student has their own unique reality which they construct through their own thoughts and perceptions, and through interacting with the world around them. Hatch (2002) stated, “While acknowledging that elements are often shared across social groups, constructivist science argues that multiple realities exist that are inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage points” (pg. 15). I believe this to be particularly true of this population, making this design ideal for this study.

Study Design

This study explored the experiences of successful college students on the autism spectrum, to determine the internal and external factors that led to the student’s success. Narrative inquiry was used, guided by the constructivist paradigm. Students on the autism spectrum often have incredibly unique thought patterns and have difficulties with reciprocity and communication (APA, 2013). They are often thought to be in a world of their own, and they are vulnerable to judgement, and extremely literal in their thought processes (Anderson & Butt, 2017). Looking at their experiences through their own

thoughts, words, and stories seemed more appropriate than an outside observation or interpretation of behaviors.

The use of an appreciative inquiry approach to questioning (Cooperrider, et al., 2003) worked well, not only because the study was exploring strengths, but because the line of questioning helped students want to be engaged, and more than likely was a welcoming counter to negativity that they have faced. There is minimal research that focuses on the strengths of students on the autism spectrum, or that uses narrative inquiry to illicit their stories. The use of narrative inquiry with this vulnerable population served to be both challenging and enlightening. Lessard, Caine, and Clandinin (2018) discussed vulnerability in narrative inquiry, and how researchers must avoid misinterpretation and judgement, specifically in working with vulnerable populations. My experience with working with students on the spectrum, both personally and professionally was a benefit to this process as I have lived and witnessed the judgement and the misinterpretation.

Participant Recruitment and Sampling

To solicit participants, this study utilized purposeful sampling. Participants were required to be students who self-reported as having an autism spectrum disorder and met the following criteria:

- successful standing at the university
- community college transfer

Students were recruited from a top-ranked public research university that agreed to allow their students to volunteer to be a part of the study. The disabilities specialist at the university contacted students who had registered with the department of disabilities with a diagnosis of ASD and met the criteria for the study. Students were sent an

invitation letter (Appendix C) with researcher contact information. They were offered a \$25 Amazon gift certificate to participate. Those who contacted the researcher were invited to a pre-interview meeting via Zoom to allow them to get more information, gain trust, build rapport, and ultimately decide if they wanted to follow through with the study. Prior to initial contact, students were sent an informed consent form (Appendix E), which was discussed at the pre-interview meeting. Eight participants volunteered and eight participants chose to continue after the initial pre-interview meeting.

Data Collection

Due to the vulnerability of this population, a pre-interview meeting was set up either virtually or face to face, depending on the desire of the participant, to discuss what the study would entail, specific details about questions, how the data would be used, and how the data would be destroyed. Individuals with ASD may have significant rigidity in their thought processes, strict adherence to routine, and narrow special interests (Frith & Happe, 2005). They may lack the ability to converse with reciprocity and may become uncomfortable disclosing personal information (Rasmussen & Pagsberg, 2019). To elicit trust and defuse anxiety, participants were offered the opportunity to view the questions before the interview. This allowed the participants to become more comfortable with the interview and gave them an opportunity to clarify or discuss any concerns at the pre-interview meeting.

After the initial pre-interview meeting semi-structured individual interviews were conducted lasting at least 45 minutes and up to 90 minutes. The second interview was optional and designed to benefit the study should a student have to take a break, become agitated, get off track in the first interview, or simply have a lot to share. I assessed the participant's behavior and prepared to end the interview early if the

participant appeared agitated or uncomfortable. There were no times when participants became upset, and while some did experience discomfort, I was able to shift the focus to help them stay engaged. The pre-interview meeting allowed time for rapport to be developed, the participant to become comfortable with the topic, and set the stage for the semi-structured interviews.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed before the coding process. The MAXQDA software program was used for help with storing information and categorizing. All data was stored on a secure password protected computer. Upon completion of the research, files will be deleted, and manual documentation shredded. This was explained to each student.

Role of the Researcher

Understanding my role as the researcher and the place from which I approach this research, was essential. As a mother of an adult with ASD, I shared similar experiences with the participants which helped gain their trust and encourage rapport, something that can be a challenge based on the ASD diagnosis. Having been through many challenges with the educational system myself, as the parent of a child with ASD, and having direct contact with an individual who shares similar characteristics as the participants, assisted me in understanding the participant's experiences, the meaning behind their statements, and in gaining their respect. Having firsthand knowledge of the language and thought process of students with ASD was beneficial in the interpretation process and the interview process. I took precautions to mitigate any bias that may come from being personally close to the diagnosis utilizing member checks, peer reviews, and journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

My role as a mental health counselor was beneficial to this study as my skill set as a clinician helped in recognizing discomfort/distress in students during the interview process and allowed me to monitor and control the length and intensity of the interviews based on student behavior. Minor provisions were made that had to do with discomfort in personal disclosure. For the most part, participants were quite open, particularly during the second interview.

Having diagnostic knowledge of ASD benefited the student in the interview process in that I could gauge their anxiety level and adjust, making the experience comfortable for them. This knowledge also helped with the analysis of the data. Insight into the diagnosis and experience with interviewing individuals and conversing within a clinical setting helped with the development of follow-up questions during the interview process as well as theme building during the coding process.

My role as an administrator at a community college has given me knowledge of the community college structure, as well as an awareness of the process for students who receive accommodations; the processes behind student completion rates, and the ability to work with students on the spectrum who are struggling. My role as a tenured faculty member prior to going to administration, and current role as adjunct faculty, gave me insight into how the college classroom may impact students on the spectrum, as well as curriculum and activities related to coursework. This knowledge helped to clarify the experiences relayed by the students with ASD, and how the experience may have been impacted by the process.

It is important to note that my experience as a mother of a child with ASD and the multiple relationships that I have had with students on the spectrum through counseling

and through working in student services, may impact my voice as a researcher. The goal of my role as the researcher is to help the reader know and understand the participants, and to present a positive perspective on students with ASD, sharing their life experiences to benefit the student population. I strive for a genuine representation of the unique and distinct voices of students with ASD who have been successful and have beneficial stories to tell. Their narratives may go a long way in helping the many students with ASD who will be entering college.

Data Analysis

Suggestions from the work of Lichtman (2014) guided my data analysis. She suggested a step-by-step process that has six stages: (1) the initial coding stage, (2) the stage of revisiting the initial coding, (3) creation of categories or central ideas, (4) a modification of the initial coding based on subsequent rereading, (5) a modification of categories and subcategories, and (6) development of concepts from categories. Lichtman (2014) called this form of coding the three C's, coding, categorizing, and concepts. Lichtman (2014) referred to "strengthening the process" (pg. 359) as going back to the initial data and adding texture and depth to enhance the interpretation. The use of metaphors, contradicting ideas within the same transcript, or epiphanies within the storytelling are examples that Lichtman (2014) gave to enhance the data.

For this study, each individual transcript was uploaded to the MAXQDO software and read line by line, highlighting common words and phrases. The resulting codes were revisited, and the data was reviewed again and categorized. Themes began to develop and were explicated for their ability to provide answers to the research questions (Appendix F).

Goodness and Trustworthiness

To ensure goodness and trustworthiness I employed methods described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was established by spending sufficient time to make sure that the participants were comfortable with the interview process, and that rapport had been built to ensure the participants were willing to share their important truths. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed the term prolonged engagement and defined it as spending ample time with the participant(s) to gain trust and become a part of their story. I utilized a pre-interview meeting, at least one 45 – 90-minute interview, and a member check through e-mail. Students on the autism spectrum often take more time to establish rapport and respect, therefore, an introductory pre-interview meeting was conducted to get to know the participant, and to fully explain the process and answer any questions that the participants had. This pre-interview meeting established rapport and helped to determine that the participants were comfortable with the process before moving further. My role as a mental health counselor and mother of an adult on the autism spectrum helped in establishing rapport, reading facial expressions and body language, and knowing when the participant had reached an appropriate level of comfort.

Transferability was another term used by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that suggested rich and thick descriptions along with vivid details of the interaction with participants to allow the reader to “transfer” the findings to their own situations. A thorough description of research context, including assumptions central to the data, participant reactions, quotes, and concluding themes will be found in Chapter Four, allowing others to transfer the results to a different context. It is the responsibility of the

person wishing to make that transfer to determine the reasonableness of the shift, however, it is the responsibility of the researcher to provide thick, rich data.

Dependability is another criterion that Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed that helped to define if the study could be performed at other institutions. This study is appropriate for duplication at diverse types of institutions utilizing the same approach with this population or another population. The process of sharing with the dissertation committee, as well as direct and frequent discussion and feedback from the dissertation chair, served as a form of external auditing.

Confirmability is essential in qualitative research as it is imperative to ensure that the research data truly reflects the participants' stories without bias from the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) referred to neutrality in much the same way, a report that is free from researcher biases or interests. Confirmability and neutrality were particularly important in this study as I am very passionate about the topic and have a lot of personal knowledge related ASD. To ensure confirmability I utilized an audit trail with a description of how categories are derived, how data is collected, and how decisions were made regarding coding and themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In neutrality, there needs to be a way to determine if the findings in the study are indeed coming from the participant, or are they coming from the biases, interests, motivations, or perspectives of the investigator (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) called it "value free inquiry" (pg. 300). The audit trail and a reflexivity journal where I kept all journal writings, observations and interview notes helped to ensure neutrality. Member checks were utilized by asking the participants to view themes and assumptions to verify or clarify. Five of the eight responded to the

member checks, and all agreed that the themes and categories garnered from the research reflected their experience.

Researcher Subjectivity Statement

This research study involved working with students with ASD at the community college level. It is important to address any subjectivity with this population, any limitations or concerns that could have impacted the interview process, the analysis of the data, and the outcome of the study. Addressing the impact of certain roles, feelings, and abilities and how they may or may not impact outcomes is essential.

While I do not know what it feels like to be a student with ASD, I do know what it is like to live with a student with ASD. Being the mother of an adult who has been through the higher education system and has had difficulties both deepens the experience and insight, but also leaves room for potential bias. Having experienced some of the pain, frustrations, and inequities that can often come with having a child that has gone through similar situations as the participants can be very beneficial to helping them feel at ease, and building rapport, but could create bias if not dealt with appropriately,

As a licensed mental health counselor, I am often compelled to give advice, insightful summaries, or lead clients to a conclusion, which is inappropriate to qualitative research. Questions asked during therapy versus questions asked during a qualitative research study are quite different. Having a semi-structured interview format helped guide by specific questions and helped me stay on track and focused on the narrative. My ability to develop rapport, learned after many years of working as a counselor, was helpful to put the students at ease.

Study Limitations

Students on the autism spectrum have unique and individual characteristics and concerns. They also may fall anywhere on the scale of an extremely broad spectrum (Brown & Coomes, 2016). The small population size is appropriate for narrative inquiry and led to a rich, deep understanding of the experiences of the students interviewed, but did not represent all experiences of students on this wide spectrum.

Since students volunteered to participate, it is possible that those students had more self-awareness, or better insight. However, it appeared that the students who volunteered for this study either wanted to help other students with ASD or volunteered to receive the gift card. The motivating factor for wanting to participate could have impacted the legitimacy of the answers.

As with any self-report measure there is a risk that students may exaggerate or minimize their experiences, as well as answer questions in a way to please the researcher. This population may tend to avoid negative experiences and often have a high opinion of themselves (Brown, 2017a; Hendrickson et al., 2017), but they seldom are motivated by wanting to please others. While it appeared that the students were quite honest and genuine, this could be a factor.

Chapter Summary

My qualitative study used a constructivist approach to analyze the life experiences of successful community college students on the autism spectrum. Research supports a significant increase in prevalence of students on the autism spectrum entering college (ASD; Nurske, et al., 2019; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Anderson et al., 2017), challenging student services personnel with developing ways to help this growing population be successful. Students with ASD often have a myriad of

talents and moderate to high intellectual ability (Bakker et al., 2020; Ousley & Cermak, 2014), yet very poor graduation and persistence rates (Gellar et al., 2015).

Research on successful students is scarce at best and will go a long way in helping to determine what internal and external factors exist in those students who succeed. In collaboration with the disabilities staff from a top ranked public research university, I interviewed eight students who successfully transferred to the university from a community college. The construction of meaning from the student experiences became a collaborative approach between myself and the students, leading to insight to better the community college experience for future students with ASD and help this growing population as well as the institutions that serve them. Chapter Four discusses the findings of my research.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

This chapter introduces the data analysis I conducted through my research with students who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and have successfully transferred from a community college to a top ranked public research university. Given the increase in the number of individuals being diagnosed with ASD (Nurske, et al., 2019; Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Anderson et al., 2017), and the poor prognosis for graduation and persistence rates for students with ASD (Gellar et al., 2015), perceptions and experiences from students who have beaten the odds and gained acceptance in a top ranked research university will serve to offer valuable insight that could be instrumental in developing programs and accommodations for these students. The extraordinary talents and academic skills that many students with ASD possess (Bakker et al., 2020; Ousley & Cermak, 2014), coupled with the poor prognosis for completion, creates a dichotomy of sorts, leading to many questions that can best be answered by those who have lived the experience, and managed to be successful. For the purposes of this study success was defined by a successful transfer from community college to a top ranked public research university.

This chapter begins with an introduction of each participant to help the reader gain an understanding of their experience and who they are as a person, and a student with ASD. It is important to note that students with autism spectrum disorder have a range of issues that are often similar but have varying degrees of severity. There was no inquiry into the severity of the participant's diagnosis as this information is not integral to this study and could have had an impact on student feelings regarding the interview.

In preparation for working with this vulnerable population, a pre-interview meeting was conducted as well as one or two follow-up interviews. The opportunity for two interviews was helpful to prepare for the possibility of a pause in the interview due to student discomfort and to ensure questions were answered thoroughly with ample time to gain an understanding of the student experience.

The research questions were as follows:

- What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the internal factors that contribute to their success?
- What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the external factors that contribute to their success?

To answer these questions, a semi-structured interview was developed with twelve questions (Appendix F) that addressed both external and internal contributors in an open-ended format, giving the students ample opportunity to share their experiences. The questions were given to the students following the pre-interview meeting and before the first interview to ease possible anxiety related to the content and implications of the questions.

Participant and Interview Descriptions

Eight students volunteered to be a part of this study, there were eight pre-interview meetings, and 15 interviews conducted either face to face or via zoom.

Table 4.1. Breakdown of participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Classification	Major
Brooklyn	Female	Recent graduate	English
Cody	Male	Senior	Computer Science
Daniel	Male	Junior	Psychology
Ian	Male	Senior	Journalism
Jeremy	Male	Junior	Computer Science
Sophie	Female	Senior	Journalism
Stephen	Male	Junior	Computer Science
Vanessa	Female	Grad. student	Criminal Justice

Brooklyn

Brooklyn recently graduated with her bachelor's in English and was currently living with her mother. She went to a public school for the first four grades, then to a charter school until 10th grade, when she became a full-time college student at the community college. She graduated with her AA and her high school diploma before transferring to the university where she lived in the residence hall.

Brooklyn referred to high school as like being in a prison and she never acclimated to the rules and regulations that went along with that environment. She attributed her success to her mother who inspired and encouraged her, offering advice and strategies to succeed. While she did not have any special relationships with her professors, she did feel supported by them and would often seek out one-on-one support through office hours and out of class meetings.

Brooklyn found comfort in sitting in the same place in each classroom every day, and in finding a spot to study that was consistent. She found that if she studied the same subject in the same place, it would help her remember the material. Brooklyn took advantage of the accommodations in college that were the most helpful to her, and that was getting assignments ahead of time, being allowed to miss class or be late, and

having extension on assignments. She said that she would sometimes have days where she felt overwhelmed and could not make it to class, but she would seek out the kind professors that would allow her to make up her assignments.

Brooklyn mentioned that at the university level, she had difficulties with a roommate and often kept to herself. Brooklyn said she was helped a lot by her disabilities specialist at the university who was there for her, but not looking over her shoulder and forcing her to be someone she was not. She did say she had a few close friends from her church group, but that she really didn't connect well with people.

Planning and goal setting were very important to her, and she felt this was instrumental to her success. She would plan out her assignments for each day and know exactly where her classes were and where she would go to complete her assignments. When asked about interactions with other people she said it was just something that she had to get through.

Group projects were difficult for Brooklyn because she felt the other students didn't seem to be serious and they often said and did things that she did not approve of (curse, talk loudly, drink, party, etc.). Along the same vein, some of the topics in class were offensive to her, so she developed a way that she would not have to read the offensive parts but could still do the assignments. Brooklyn disclosed that in the beginning she did not want to label herself and reach out for help through the disabilities department, but her mother convinced her that it would be beneficial, and she saw the benefits once she was involved. While she said that she never really used a lot of the academic accommodations, it was nice knowing that she could if she needed to.

Brooklyn participated rarely in student life programs, was involved in one club specific to students on the autism spectrum and did socialize with peers through her church group. Brooklyn was diagnosed when she was 20 years old, so it was a very recent diagnosis, she did not seem comfortable discussing the reasons behind the diagnosis and said that she did not like counseling and did not feel that it was helpful.

Brooklyn believed that the key to success was to be creative, flexible, plan ahead, and most of all, not to give up. Both of her interviews were conducted via Zoom and had a total time of one hour and seven minutes.

Cody

Cody had an interesting mix of indifference and determination throughout the interview process. He spoke mostly of academics and was most comfortable when he was giving advice or being helpful. He seemed less comfortable when the questions were of a personal nature, so I let Cody take the lead on how in-depth the interview went. For instance, when I asked about his experience with peers at the community college, he became visibly uncomfortable, and I changed the topic to a discussion of his academic achievements.

Cody, unlike most of the participants, was diagnosed in early childhood at the age of eight. He attended community college for two years and was in his senior year at the university with a computer science major. He lived in off-campus housing and was a part-time employee at the university. Cody tended to intellectualize, which again alluded to a discomfort in topics of an emotional nature. I gaged his comfort level and when he seemed to become uncomfortable with personal topics, I would go back to academics, which was clearly where he felt safe and confident.

Cody shared that elementary school was “the bottom of the barrel”, and he struggled socially. He shared that people with what he called a “social diagnosis” spent a large part of their lives hearing negative comments and were sometimes blamed by parents. He never referred to himself specifically when discussing these topics, however my impression was that he was indirectly referring to himself.

Cody attributed his success to his dedication to academics, and while he did say that his parents and grandparents were encouraging, he made a point to say that they encouraged him to do well in school, which again, shifted the focus to academics. He proudly stated that with all the scholarships that he was getting, he was, in fact, getting paid to go to school. Cody claimed that he had never struggled academically and was pretty much good at all things academic.

Cody planned everything out from where he would go from the university and beyond, and the planning began when he was in high school. In his own words, he was “obsessed” with doing well academically. There were many elements of goal setting and planning each step one by one in his efforts toward growth and education. Other than mentioning the encouragement that he got from family for doing well in school, he rarely mentioned relationships. He did say that the instructors in college were sufficient but could not relay any details or specifics of any who had an impact on him.

During the second interview, while still quite reserved, Cody disclosed a bit more and said he was a part of a club at the college for students with ASD, and he had become a part of the mentoring program to mentor other students with ASD. The first interview was conducted via Zoom and was 43 minutes in length. Cody kept his camera

turned off for the first interview, which was perfectly acceptable, but he asked for the second interview to be in person and that interview was one hour in length.

Daniel

Daniel was home-schooled throughout the elementary and high school years and attended community college while he was finishing high school. He felt that the home-school environment was very beneficial to him as he could work at his own pace, and it offered support from other home-school families. He enjoyed how some of the parents would come and speak about their career and give a practical knowledge of specific occupations. Daniel explained that he did a lot of research on his own, looking into possible careers. He was tentative to share at the beginning of the interview but became more open as the interview progressed

Daniel graduated high school and received his AA degree simultaneously. He was currently a junior at the university and majoring in psychology, however, he planned to change his major to pre-med. Daniel was diagnosed at the age of 17 when he sought help for feeling depressed. When he spoke about his future academic goals, he became more animated, displaying optimism and speaking freely about his areas of interest. He admits that he had profound challenges with social interaction and has worked on those in therapy.

Daniel attributed a lot of his success to support from the faculty and his parents. He felt the disabilities resource center was very important for students with ASD and did register for accommodations, but said he never used them. He utilized planning and structure to help keep himself on track. He also spoke of the benefits of joining clubs and being around people who shared the same interests.

Daniel expressed the importance of an orientation-style course in the first semester of college, to help in finding out where the resources are, which people can help if you are in need, and connecting with other students who may be new and apprehensive. Daniel's first interview was via Zoom and was one hour and twelve minutes in length. He asked to have his second interview in person, and it was thirty minutes in length.

Ian

Ian began the interview with enthusiasm and confidence, seeming slightly distracted at times, but talkative and with a modicum of pomposity. He attended community college for two years and was a journalism major in his senior year at the university, living in the dorm. Ian was very active in clubs and student life activities in both the community college and the university and had several success stories to tell about his adventures in being a leader among students.

Ian attributed a lot of his success to the support that he received from his parents and other family members, and his drive for success. He spoke passionately about wanting to prove others wrong, alluding to the fact that he was often not supported, and alienated by the diagnosis of ASD. He did feel supported by professors however, in both the community college and at the university but was quick to point out that he was not shy about asking for help. He complimented the disabilities service center at both institutions he attended and utilized accommodations, but said they were mostly for a co-morbid diagnosis rather than the ASD.

Ian felt as if the key to success in college was to get involved and take advantage of all the opportunities that the college has to offer. He spoke highly of the relationships he had formed in college and advised students who are struggling to talk to people, get

to know people and the surroundings, and enjoy the traditional college life. Of all the participants, Ian was the only student who had no history of difficulties in making connections and being comfortable around people.

When asked how he would advise those students who have anxieties about relationships, he suggested utilizing resources, specifically counseling. While Ian was clearly the most optimistic of the participants, his interview was more cursory in nature. Ian's interview was conducted via Zoom and was 35 minutes in length. In the beginning of the first interview Ian had his camera turned off, but by the end he was showing me around his dorm room. After several emails to engage in a second interview, Ian declined.

Jeremy

Jeremy was in his junior year at the university, lived in an apartment off-campus, and was a computer science major. Jeremy appeared to be a very independent young man, both in his thought processes and in his behavioral habits. Jeremy admitted that he struggled academically from time to time, but seemed to have been able to adapt, however, he made several self-deprecating comments throughout the interviews.

Jeremy was involved in student life activities (clubs of interest) both at the community college and at the university level. He spoke highly of the disabilities services office and said he did register for accommodations but rarely used them. He did say that he utilized the private rooms in the library for studying and the student centers. He mentioned that the resources could use more advertisement, as he did not really become aware of them until after he had been at college for a while.

Jeremy was diagnosed with ASD in high school following an altercation with his parents. He did not embrace the diagnosis and commented that he never disclosed his

diagnosis to anyone, not even his closest friends. It was interesting to note that he volunteered to do the study despite this fact, but he said he would like to have a part in helping other people who struggle.

In the second interview that was held in person, Jeremy revealed a little more and seemed more comfortable with disclosure. He shared that he suffered from social anxiety frequently and had used alcohol to help cope with that issue in the past. He shared that he would hide from his roommates, only coming out of the room when they were gone, and that he had trouble even speaking to the store clerks. While he did not mention any experiences in bullying, he did mention high school several times with a negative slant. There was an aspect of feeling outcast by his way of thinking. For example, he discussed how other people didn't seem to be concerned about breaking the rules and didn't always understand him. He said when this happened, he would just stop talking, sometimes going weeks without talking to people.

What was really refreshing about Jeremy's interview experience was the difference between interview one and interview two. He was so apprehensive coming into the first interview, very closed and seemed suspicious. By the second interview he was more talkative, more open, and more trusting. His first interview was via Zoom, and it was 35 minutes long. His second interview he asked to be in person, and it was 56 minutes in length.

Sophie

Sophie attended community college and two semesters in the university's on-line program before entering her senior year as a journalism major. Sophie began her senior year in a practical program that offered hands-on instruction in her field of interest and

gave her the opportunity to interact with those who had the same interests and goals. She spoke very highly of both the online environment and the practical field experience.

Throughout the interview Sophie discussed the importance of planning and scheduling and making sure that she was on task by using a multitude of tools. She was diagnosed late, in fact within two years prior to the interview, and did not see her ASD as a label, rather an answer to questions that she had for years, and helpful in looking for tools and strategies to help her succeed. Sophie grew up in an environment that was part of the world of disabilities in that both of her parents worked in the field, and a sibling had an early diagnosis of a different disorder. Her speech was activist at times, pointing out injustices in ableism and sexism. While her diagnosis was late, she did struggle throughout school and was encouraged to succeed by her parents and teachers, both of whom she felt helped and supported her throughout her academic career.

Sophie has been surrounded by people who inspired her, including her own family, and group experiences through her parents' work. She was brought up to do things on her own, such as cleaning, cooking, and self-advocating. While Sophie seemed to gain energy and support from those close to her, she did discuss how long periods of time surrounded by many people can be draining for her. She also mentioned sensory issues several times during the interview but has developed strategies and tools to manage those difficulties.

Sophie spoke of how she learned adapting skills for when she felt overwhelmed, and these have certainly helped her be successful. She believed that she will make a

significant impact in her field of choice. Both interviews with Sophie were on Zoom and lasted a total of 2 hours and 20 minutes.

Stephen

Stephen attended community college while in high school and graduated with his high school diploma and his community college AA at the same time. Stephen is currently in a computer science degree program, his first year at the university, and living in off campus housing, the first time away from home. He discussed that he had a tremendous amount of support from his family and that he was strengthened through them and his faith in God. He also discussed teachers who had been impactful to him in a positive way.

Stephen told a story of a boy who struggled throughout school, has a creative streak that he was proud of, and used distraction to cope with anxiety and stress caused by bullying and academic pressures that he put on himself. He had a later diagnosis as a sophomore in high school where he said he got in trouble in school with an altercation with some other students. His parents wanted to prevent serious consequences, so they took him to a clinician who diagnosed Stephen with ASD. He does not enjoy having that label, and while he understands some of the behaviors and the way that he thinks aligns with the diagnosis, he would rather not be seen as autistic.

Stephen used planning and scheduling to help him stay on track and was often optimistic in his comments, yet self-deprecating at times. I got the feeling that when he was being optimistic, he was masking, something that he professed to learn at a very young age. His first interview was via Zoom and lasted one hour, he preferred an in-person interview for the second one, and it was 46 minutes.

Vanessa

Vanessa was in her last semester of graduate school and taking the last few courses online. She attended community college for two years, two years on campus at the university, and was finishing a graduate degree at home. Vanessa spoke of a tumultuous childhood that included bullying, some negativity from teachers, and a struggle with anger management. She was medically excused in high school (meaning she was allowed to complete high school at home due to an altercation at school and her ASD diagnosis) and then entered community college which she described to be a much better experience than prior years, both academically and personally.

Vanessa seemed to be significantly impacted by both negative and positive reactions of those around her and spoke frequently of her experiences with supportive people who worked with her in college, especially within the community college system. She remembered names of people and interesting things about them and was quick to compliment them and share the impact they had on her life. She also spoke about the influence of her mother and her sibling when transitioning from the community college to the university.

Vanessa spoke quickly and passionately, especially when it came to her desire to make a difference with people and her goal to do well academically. She was very active in clubs, had gained friends that she still shares a relationship with years later, and frequently turns to others for help. She appears to get her energy by her interaction with others and focused more on relationships than her own personal characteristics, which was more difficult to disclose for her. While she did say that she was very determined and clearly had a passion for doing well academically, she spoke very little of her own personal characteristics when speaking of her success. She was very

outspoken about her willingness for the second interview and was eager to meet with me again. Both interviews totaled one hour and 45 minutes.

Data Analysis Process

Analysis began after the first set of participant interviews. I utilized MAXQDA Plus 2020 software to help organize my coding process. I reviewed each transcript line by line and notations were made and highlighted. Categories began to take form quite effortlessly and were modified with subsequent rereading. The student narratives were surprisingly similar which led to theme development that highlighted their experiences as community college students with ASD. The participants' perceptions of the internal and external factors that led to their success became defined through analyzing their comments and identifying similarities in their experiences. Four themes emerged from each of the two research questions, leaving a total of eight themes. The codes, categories and themes can be seen in Appendix F.

Emerging Concepts/Themes

From each of the two research questions, four themes emerged. The first research question was as follows:

What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the internal factors that contribute to their success?

Determination

Every participant in the study spoke of an inherent desire to do well academically, and a determination to not give up despite the challenges. They all seemed to assume that when discussing success in college, it pertained to their ability to maintain excellent grades

Determination was discussed frequently. While some students attributed their determination to being taught, most felt it was simply a part of their internal trait system, not learned, but a significant part of who they were as a student with ASD. Sophie shared, "I just have like, a persistence that's been kind of ingrained in me." Ian commented, "I can actually be determined to prove something that I feel strongly about. Whenever I set my mind to do something I do it. I don't let my mind change that on me." Much of Cody's interview was focused on his determination when it came to academics. He said, "I made sure to work hard, study well, and give my full effort on every assignment . . . I'm pretty much obsessed with maintaining my GPA."

Stephen shared that he experienced difficulties in social situations, and he felt pressured to spend more time with his fellow classmates. There were times when he wanted to give up, but he persevered. He was convinced that by not being as social as other students, he could focus his time on what he claimed to be most important to him, and that was academics. He felt that he was less distracted and better able to succeed academically by relinquishing the need for friendships.

It's harder in college, because everyone's talking about how they want you to be social and everything, but when you're not very social, you have more time to focus on your schoolwork, to really get ahead. (Stephen)

It became clear that all the participants were proud of their academic achievements and were willing to go through a great deal to succeed. While Stephen saw his lack of social interaction as a way to highlight academics, Daniel persisted in what he called "enduring the pain of socialization" in order to be more successful. Daniel said, "Social interactions were extremely hard for me. I did not like talking to people. But I was willing to go through that discomfort to be able to do well in the class."

Seven of the eight students in my study had a history of challenges with academics in the past but were able to be academically successful despite those challenges, and none of them saw academics as a significant challenge at the time of the interview. Seven of the eight students discussed challenges with communicating with others, however, that continued to be a concern. Three students mentioned significant sensory concerns but had learned to adapt with the help of tools and techniques.

Three of the eight participants found their determination through a desire to invalidate negative feedback from others, such as bullies, naysayers, or other people who had given them the perception that they thought they could not be successful. The participants shared a desire to prove to others that they could succeed despite their disability. Daniel said, "If I'm told, I can't do something, or it's too hard, I really want to prove that I can." Ian seemed to be the most adamant about proving people who had been unkind to him, wrong.

Because everybody's like, Ha! Ha! Ha! Look at them, they have learning disabilities. They are not as smart as us. They want to put us down. I don't have physical disabilities on the outside, but I do on the inside and basically that drives me to be better. I have a way of using that as a means to getting it in my system, like. oh, you have a disability, prove yourself, prove yourself, prove yourself! (Ian)

Stephen had a similar comment, "I was also bullied a lot, and psychologically, I wanted to prove people wrong, that I was better than what they thought I was, that I could just overcome and succeed and not be like them."

While most students talked about wanting to show others how well they could do, interestingly, three of the participants were motivated by a desire to do something momentous. They gave the impression that they would not give up until they had

accomplished something memorable. When asked what motivates him to be successful, Daniel said, "I have a calling for wanting to be able to accomplish something significant." Sophie also believed that she was destined to make a difference, "I knew that I wanted to do something, something big in the future. I don't know, I just kind of felt like I was important."

Participants expressed how academics had become a sense of pride for them. Cody was the most prideful of his academic accomplishments, and as he spoke about his success, he displayed an air of confidence.

It may have started out in a practical way, but then what started out as a means of achieving the goal of getting the Bright Futures Academic Scholars Award and a full ride scholarship, after that was assured, it became a matter of pride. (Cody)

Sophie took pride in knowing that she had control over her own happiness and success.

So, it was just kind of like a boundary that I set for myself, I was like, I'm never going to go below this level. I never want to get below a B, if I do that, I'm working my tail off to get above that, because I don't want to see that. (Sophie)

Stephen, like Sophie, was quite determined and understood the importance of taking an active stance in his learning. The following statement demonstrates his determination.

I had to really make learning my passion. I had to look at my workload, and everything that I had to do. Part of it I picked up on easily but from there on I had to really work at it and let that talent grow, and to keep growing. I often went whole nights just doing homework because I wanted it to be the best that it could possibly be. And I take my time to make sure that's how it is and to really allow my work just to be the best in the whole class, if not the whole school really, and that's how I've won competitions. (Stephen)

The students tended to compare themselves to others, and for some students, the comparison proved helpful. Vanessa frequently compared herself to her classmates. She shared, "So, when I see other people doing well, I'm like, well, if I'm not doing quite

as well, I'm like, okay, maybe I need to raise my bar a little bit." Wanting to prove themselves, which came easily through academics, was not the only thing that kept students determined.

Many students mentioned that they were motivated by the need for a secure future through a successful career. Cody mentioned the idea of career success frequently, "Basically, I would like to be successful. I'm looking forward to a secure job, professional status, and the titles that come with education." Daniel wanted a successful career to be able to experience life, "I want to be able to travel one day and be able to do things like have experiences. I want to also get a job that will allow me to afford these experiences." Sophie also emphasized career and used positive self-talk for motivation.

So, where in my head I said okay, I can't do this, or I don't want to have to, but I was like, no, I want to succeed and I want to do really well and make my parents proud and I want to work in the future. (Sophie)

The determination that the students experienced to be successful, whether it came from a place of proving others wrong, wanting to have a viable career, or an internal desire to make a difference, impacted the students to continue despite often feeling overwhelmed by college life. To overcome feelings of anxiety that came from feeling overwhelmed, they turned to their comfort zone, planning and structure.

Planning/Structure

Seven of the eight students interviewed referred to planning/structure when discussing strategies for being successful. It became evident that were utilizing tools to help them stay on track with their assignments and their obligations

I would literally take every single assignment, I would write down the due date, like it was my school planner, and then I would write down what other tasks that I had underneath that, but it was primarily for school. And I

would write down all the assignments on their due dates and what time they were due that day. And then I also scheduled when I was going to do them and how long it was going to take me. (Brooklyn)

Brooklyn also made a point to create routines for herself as routines were quite important to her and helped keep her organized. She said, "I'd do work in the same place ... sitting in the same place ... and just try to make things routine." She found it comforting to sit in the same seat in her classes, and study in the same places on campus. When asked what works for him to be successful, Daniel said, "I think setting these goals for myself ... the step-by-step process to get me where I need to go." Daniel admitted that the desire to plan ahead and create structure came from his ASD diagnosis.

I plan ahead, and I know that it's part of my diagnosis, like being very particular. I just started a class and within the first two weeks, I had started my research paper that was due at the end of the semester. (Daniel)

Sophie explained how she came to realize that planning and structure was something that she utilized early on, and that realization had a significant impact on her success.

There are so many new things now, you can get a like three different structured planners in two days. And that's been something that helps me, honestly. For me, a lot of times if things are out of sight they are out of mind. I have to have things staring me right in the face to remember them. That's been a big part of my life journey, understanding that I have to get things down on my phone or on post-it notes or something. (Sophie)

Sophie also related her desire for planning to her diagnosis, she said, "I think ... one of the things with autism is like setting rules for yourself, setting certain rigid boundaries. She found that she could be successful if she made sure that she had all assignments written in a planner with due dates and specific times to complete tasks, "My biggest thing is due dates, and what my schedule is going to look like for the week...If I can't

map out when I have to do certain things at the beginning of the semester, I had a very hard time.”

When asked what she would suggest for a new student with ASD, Sophie said, “I’m going to say, get yourself a good schedule book that works for you.... maybe a couple of days before the semester starts ... go on campus and find where your classes are and how long it actually takes for to get there”.

Many of the participants mentioned how completing assignments ahead of time had been beneficial to their success, often to avoid pitfalls at the end of the semester and escape stress.

One thing I also do to combat stress is to get work done ahead of time. I try to go into bursts of energy where I just get everything down in one moment and then I wouldn't have to worry about it at all and I try to keep it as a habit and keep going and going until I'm pretty much done until the end of the semester and it's early and I can just relax and prepare for finals. (Stephen)

The students were all very vocal about their determination to succeed and they all struggled at some point, either academically, socially, emotionally, physically, or any combination of those challenges. Setting strict boundaries for themselves, and utilizing routine and structure proved to be very beneficial. Another factor that all students had in common, and stood out in helping them break down barriers, was their adapting skills.

Adapting skills

Every participant in the study spoke of the importance of adapting, both to be successful in school and in life in general. The participants in this study shared that in first coming to the university from the community college, they often had difficulties with socializing, adapting to roommates, adapting to chaotic and unstructured classrooms, keeping on track with assignments, and dealing with the sensory overload of the college

setting. When asked what characteristics or traits they possess that helped them be successful despite these challenges, many students mentioned their abilities to adapt.

When asked what specific skills she had that were beneficial to her success, Brooklyn said, “My adapting skills. I didn’t necessarily try and fit myself into what everyone else was doing. I’m pretty creative and would come up with whatever works the best for me.” She gave an example of when she was struggling with one class that was large and loud and chaotic, causing her much anxiety. She worked with the instructor to do her assignments online for the most part, and only occasionally went to class in person. Cody’s answer to the same question was. “I’m willing to adapt. I’ll definitely do pretty much anything that they tell me to do on an assignment as long as they make it clear what I’m supposed to do.” Sophie also utilized adaptation to find her way through challenging situations. And like Cody, she mentioned the importance of faculty making assignments clear. She prided herself on her adaptive skills and her ability to be observant.

I am very observant. I think with that comes an ability to be very aware of the people around you or to be very aware of everything, to be honest; to be able to read people and be able to express yourself a little bit better because of that. I know that if I express myself the way that I intend to people would not understand it or it would come off harsher than necessary, so I pull back, or do what I have to do to go an alternate route.
(Sophie)

Stephen emphasized that it was important to adapt to uncomfortable social situations. He gave an example of when a student may be uncomfortable around roommates, “He could start by leaving when they are not around, you know, when it’s dead silent ... move your schedule around ... it’s all about taking baby steps and sealing the deal ... getting used to getting out with other people there”. Stephen later admitted that he had experienced this same type of anxiety and would leave at 4am to avoid seeing his

roommates when he first arrived, but he had gradually gotten to a place where he is comfortable with them.

Vanessa discussed adapting as it related to learning more about herself, “I know how long it takes me to adjust to a certain amount of difficulty...I know how long it takes for me to make friends ... and what I need to be successful.” She also gradually learned to adapt to the sensory issues that were very difficult for her in the community college setting. By the time Sophie had enrolled at the university, she had developed techniques, like the use of noise cancelling headphones, loops (that help with noise reduction), fidget toys, and a solid routine that she had created for herself to adjust to the difficulties. Sophie had the most to say about adjusting skills, and she shared that she began learning to adjust at a very young age. “I had to make these coping mechanisms very early on ... it is also a part of masking, which is giving people what they want to hear”. Sophie attributed a lot of her success to learning how to adapt in the classroom setting, “I feel like if I were any less capable of adapting to different situations ... my grade would not be what it is right now.” Many of the students felt that part of adapting was finding ways to increase motivation. Brooklyn rewarded herself with one of her favorite things, coffee.

I really like coffee so that helped me ... it's like you're doing this work that you really don't want to do, but you get to have coffee while you do it. This type of adjusting is realizing that a job must be accomplished but finding ways to make it interesting or at least bearable. (Brooklyn)

A pattern began to develop as the participants discussed their interests. Many of them discussed how their special interests (sometimes seen as a disadvantage), have helped them be successful. Many students revealed that utilizing these interests can help them towards success.

Utilizing Interests

The participants in this study all had very specialized interests, which is not surprising, because specialized interests are a part of the ASD diagnosis (APA, 2013). What is fascinating and impressive, is that the participants in my study had determined a way to use those specialized interests in their favor. When asked about his own personal motivators towards success, Jeremy said, "Interest in subjects. I kind of like, want to learn." Stephen revealed that he wants to turn his interests into a career, "I want to make it so that all of those hobbies I do are what I want to do, and that if I love what I'm doing then it won't feel like I'm working at all, and I can just do it all day." He explained how he was excited about his future and planned to utilize his interests to succeed. Sophie shared a story regarding her interests and how much it helped her be successful by studying the topic she loved, journalism. She described her first day on campus when she was introduced to where she would be doing one of her more practical courses.

It was like a fully functional newsroom! It's kind of like unassuming, but you walk up and it's like huge! And then there's a whole section for radio, a whole section for web TV, and for ESPN. And then there's live booths. And it's crazy. And I think getting that experience hands on in an environment where I don't get a grade on it, it's just pass or fail and just kind of like shadow and learn really helped me because I know the expectations. (Sophie)

Vanessa felt it was important for students to take classes that that interested them and kept their attention, to be successful,

I would like to say I've taken the right classes for me. . . When I'm not interested in the class, I will completely be like, this is so difficult for me. It's so hard. When I'm really invested in a class, it comes so naturally for me to do well. (Vanessa)

Daniel told the story of being a young boy and being interested in the medical field, he said his mother would take him to the library and he would do copious research on different fields of medical practice. “As a kid I had the resources to look into these fields and get more knowledge on them. I couldn’t get enough of it.” Daniel will be entering pre-med next semester. Sophie utilized her special interests to find her career field as well, she made an interesting comment related to utilizing role models in the field,

You could be as successful as this guy who is similar to you in this way, or maybe involved like special interests and be like, look at this person, they are super interested in this just like you and they're successful. (Sophie)

Several of the students mentioned that utilizing interests to make connections with people helped them overcome their challenges with social interactions. Ian advised students with ASD to “find something that you like to do”. He got involved in a recreational sport and student government that not only allowed him an opportunity to interact with others with similar interests but assisted him in getting engaged at the college level.

In this study, the participants saw that the utilization of their interests was a way that they could take something that was a part of who they are and use it to their advantage. They perceived studying subjects that they are interested in, following career paths that align with their interests, and finding people to be around who are interested in the same things, helped them be successful. Two of the participants mentioned the importance of connecting with faculty who align with their areas of interest, which leads to external factors that the student perceived to be helpful to their success.

The second research question addressed the external factors as follows: What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the external factors that contribute to their success?

Parents/Family

Eight out of the eight students interviewed attributed much of their success to the support and encouragement that they received from family members from mom (the highest-ranking family member when it comes to support) to dad, siblings, cousins, and grandparents. The students I interviewed all continued to receive support from their family, however, it seemed to come from a place of empowerment and support rather than management. This is a very important differentiation as students with an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in high school have very little control over what happens to them in the school setting, and it is common for parents to be the gatekeepers. When a student goes to college, parents are no longer in control of the student's education. This can be very challenging for both child and parent. The participants in my study had parents that made that transition successfully. They were supportive and encouraging, but not controlling or demanding. Brooklyn had an excellent example of how her mom helped her when she feels overwhelmed. When asked what she saw as past experiences that led to success, Brooklyn said,

Probably my mom, mostly ... if I would get overwhelmed, or just completely want to give up on something, she would help me. And she would tell me, what's the next thing that we need to do to get to the end goal? ... And she would take me through the steps that I need to get there. (Brooklyn)

Sophie said, "My mom was always very vigilant, about like, you can do it, you are going to be a strong woman." Vanessa also attributed a lot of her success to her mom, "My mom has been a big part of my life. Probably like, most of the things I have come from

her.” Sophie shared, “They [parents] are my whole world.” She was quick to say that her parents introduced her to the world in a way that allowed her to shine, despite her differences.

Parents seemed to matter most, but other family members were significant contributors to success, according to the participants in this study. Three of the eight participants mentioned siblings as a contributing factor to their success, whether it be as a person to listen and give advice, or someone to help more directly. Two participants had siblings as roommates at one point in their educational career, and one person had a cousin who attended the university that he saw as a role model. One participant mentioned financial and emotional support from grandparents

Two of the eight students mentioned familial financial support as a means of helping them be successful, noting that it relieved anxiety that may come from financial restraints. Jeremy was very grateful to his parents for allowing him the opportunity to do without additional financial worries. When asked what sets him apart from students with ASD who may not have been as successful, Jeremy noted,

The biggest thing is like, the financial support of my parents, not having to worry about finances is probably the biggest factor. Also, when I was going to [community college] my grandparents helped me out with like, going to the store and getting groceries. (Jeremy)

Ian answered the question in a similar way, “Obviously I would say parents being the first and most important. My parents have my back no matter what happens.” When Daniel was asked what people had been the most influential in helping him be successful, he said, “My father and my grandmother, my whole family was very encouraging. They didn’t tell me, ‘Oh don’t try applying to college, you won’t get in’.

They were very encouraging.” Ian also discussed emotional and financial support from

his parents. When asked about external factors to his success, Ian said, "Obviously, I would say parents being the first and the most important ... my parents have always had my back." While Ian was very vocal about his parent's role in his success, he spoke very highly of involvement in student life and campus activities which became the next most mentioned external factor leading to success.

Student Life/Campus Activities

Every participant in the study was involved in at least one club on campus at either the community college, or the university, or both. They perceived this involvement to be integral to their success. While joining clubs were not easy for seven of the eight participants, they found a way to incorporate student life activities into their college experience. Two of the participants had been founding members of a club.

Ian was most expressive when discussing his involvement with student life. He expressed that without his extra-curricular involvement, he would have not been as successful. When asked what advice he would give a student with ASD who was just entering the community college, he said, "I would say make plenty of friends. Make group chats with your classmates, get involved. Find something that you like to do. Go and find something to alleviate stress for yourself." For the other seven participants, it was not as easy to make friends and participate in social events. Seven of the eight students said they had experienced discomfort to one degree or another with relating to others, however, when the setting was one where the students could share a common interest, the challenge became less daunting. Daniel said,

I think that [club involvement] helped a lot. Because it was, like I was able to find something that I was interested in and find other people with the same interest. And at the same time, if I wanted to develop my knowledge on that more, I had the professor at every meeting. (Daniel)

Jeremy and Sophie both joined clubs related to their majors, and they found this to be a benefit socially, emotionally, and academically. Sophie shared,

It's an environment where we all get really close, and like try to help each other out. I think that having both of those environments where like, I have people who I can talk to, and I don't feel so alone. (Sophie)

While some of the students were passionate about clubs, others were less so, but all of them felt as if getting involved with student life was important for success. Stephen utilized student life involvement as a way to socialize that seemed less daunting for him. "I usually just find people who I enjoy hobbies with, I already know, and in some type of club or organized setting so that I don't have to put in as much effort to engage." He found it more comfortable discussing shared interests and hobbies as opposed to feelings or "small talk".

Vanessa joined a club that utilized peer mentoring, and felt that having a mentor was helpful, especially for resources and emotional support. She spoke of her club experience as helping her navigate college life.

Anytime while I was feeling like, oh, my gosh, I can't do this. I reached out to one of the mentors, and they were like, oh, I can help you schedule your information, like, help you get resources. And it was really great, definitely gave me something to look forward to. (Vanessa)

Cody also found comfort in student life involvement and had recently become a mentor for other students through a club designed to help students with ASD. He shared, "We have activities ... we regularly talk about how the week went, and we often discuss social problems, difficulties, and challenges." Daniel emphasized the importance of faculty involvement with clubs and student life, he found a club through faculty coming to speak in his classroom, "I think that helped a lot because I was able to find something I was interested in and find other people with the same interests."

Jeremy said that in his second semester of community college he found a club that spoke to his academic abilities. He had expressed difficulties with social interaction, but through his success with academics, was able to find a club where he could relate to the other members. He said it was "... kind of a like a quiz bowl team. That was pretty neat, just like hanging out with the people there." Stephen was in clubs at the community college as well and had great suggestions on promoting club activity. When asked how he would encourage a student with ASD to join a club, he said,

Try and create sort of situations where they wouldn't feel intimidated to go and be in a group like say you go to a club for anything that you like, maybe chess club or whatever. And you know, you can always provide resources for making connections, you can emphasize how, if they are in a group getting involved, then it will, in time, be better on them. And it will help them in their academics. (Stephen)

For some of the students it seemed as if student life engagement was more of something that they thought they should do as opposed to something they had a desire to do. Three out of the eight students seemed truly engaged in student life, while five seemed to be engaged because it either looked good on their resume, someone had told them it would be a good thing to do, or they just thought it was the right thing to do.

Vanessa was one of the three who was very active and gained a lot of knowledge and friends from the club she was involved with. Vanessa shared that she is still friends with some students that she met in undergraduate clubs. She had some low times emotionally, and she said the friends and mentors from the club were truly inspiring. She said, "It's the only reason I kept doing school."

As with most conditions involving students with ASD, there is a wide range of variances in perspectives. While all students felt student life/club life was a contributor to their success, some of them felt the impact was significant, while others seemed to

simply put up with the practice. Stephen seemed less passionate about clubs but understood that it was an important part of the college experience. He shared, “I wanted to succeed, and to really get out there. And I figured that since everyone talks about how clubs are good for college...I would just force myself to get involved in my freshman and sophomore years.” Stephen was also the only participant who did not rank faculty relationships as a significant factor to their success, however he did share that he had had trouble with some faculty, highlighting the impact that faculty relationships have on students both positively and negatively.

Faculty Relationships

Six out of the eight participants in my study claimed that faculty relationships and support were key to their progress. Vanessa relayed multiple stories from elementary school to high school and then at the community college level that made a significant positive impact on her. She still remembered names and details years later. She claimed that a supportive, encouraging teacher can make the difference in whether a student wants to go to school, or even finish.

But like the teachers where you do have a really positive interactions with and multiple interactions, one on one, I feel like that has really shaped how much I like and enjoy school. Yeah, that's probably due to the interactions I've had with teachers. (Vanessa)

Several participants mentioned visiting professors during their office hours as something that helped them be successful. They also mentioned the importance of professors being available to students. Daniel shared, “I went to some professors who were teaching a bunch of classes, and it took just to respond to an email, like two or three days because they had so much.” He expressed the importance of professors being available for students and said that if he ran a college, he would make sure that

professors had a moderate workload so that they could spend more time interacting with students.

A second participant also shared a concern about professors who may not be available, or who were too busy to make time for a student. Sophie shared some concerns that many faculty were not aware of the difficulties that students with ASD face because the students don't always feel comfortable in sharing, and their disabilities cannot be seen. She felt that it was very important for faculty members to get to know students and be able to relate to them as the individuals that they are, and she found that this is not always the case. When asked how to accomplish that, she made this suggestion,

I think it would be nice to contact the teachers directly before the semester starts and give them the setup, like, these are the things that I know I'll need. Ask questions about how the course is structured, I actually need that for myself. I think asking questions and maybe getting like advanced information. (Sophie)

Faculty interaction is particularly important with a population who often feels as if they are, as Ian explained, "...going against the grain."

Six of the eight participants credited faculty for helping them be successful at the community college level. Daniel shared,

One big thing, in the community college, my professors were all extremely nice. And they were willing to help. My first professor that I had, I took multiple classes with her and that was my introduction. And she was encouraging. And any mistakes that she would point out, she wouldn't just mark something wrong, she'd say why it was wrong. (Daniel)

Stephen saw the professor interaction as being helpful to him academically, with less of a focus on the emotional support. "My positive interactions have been meeting with teachers and professors in trying to get along with them and to work with them so that I succeed in class."

In addition to support from faculty, the students in this study also claimed to benefit from academic supports (such as accommodations, tutoring, and other college support systems). While the students rarely used accommodations, they saw them as being beneficial. They spoke highly of tutoring, but also rarely accessed that that service. It appears the students were seeing the need for these services for students in general, while they seldom utilized them.

Student Services

The theme of student services as an external factor for success was derived from comments regarding student services departments, including the disabilities department, tutoring, advising, and counseling. Students did not seem to utilize services that focused on academics (as stated earlier, they were very confident in their academic abilities), but they did promote student services resources. Many students shared stories of interacting with student services personnel as a way to help them be successful.

When asked what advice he would give a student with ASD coming to community college for the first time, Cody said, "I would say, definitely reach out for resources if you feel you need them. And then just don't let the fact that you have ASD stop you from trying to be successful." While every student interviewed had positive comments to say about the department of disabilities at both the community college and the university, and they all received accommodations at both institutions, those accommodations were rarely used. It is interesting how many of the students in the study suggested accommodations as being helpful, but they infrequently used them. Sophie shared, "I definitely use the extended time, but I only use it really during the

beginning of the semester when things are kind of crazy. And I'm like, listen, I don't know when I'm going to get this done.”

When asked what advice she would give to a new student with ASD, Brooklyn suggested, “I'd say, get the accommodations that you need, like meet with a learning specialist at the [disability office] and get the accommodations. The professors aren't going to know what your reason is for having accommodations.” She seemed to think a barrier to students utilizing accommodations may be that they are uncomfortable with faculty knowing that they had a disability. Vanessa also mentioned that she perceived one of the reasons why some students do not register with the department of disabilities at the community college level is because they do not think it would be helpful, “I did use them [disabilities office], but it wasn't like, I mean, it was really great for accommodations, but I don't want to be rude, but that's kind of like all it was good for.” She felt different about the office of disabilities at the university. She shared, “...they host little events and gatherings, like little social things. I was like, wow, this is really good!” Vanessa admitted that it was difficult to walk into the office of disabilities at first, but said, “Once you have a positive experience with that, it becomes more like, oh, maybe I'll go back.” When asked what the biggest advantage was of working with the office of disabilities, Brooklyn mentioned the non-academic benefits. She shared this about the specialist at her college,

I would just go to her if I needed something, and she provided what I needed. But it wasn't like I had to check in with her or tell her about my life or my friends, or anything like that. I would go if I needed a certain accommodation, or if I needed her to email somebody for me. I would just ask her if I needed something. And she was just there for me. (Brooklyn)

When speaking of his university experience, Ian said, “I don't think I would be able to succeed without the disability center.” However, the community college experience with

the department of disabilities was more about accommodations, which he mainly used for a co-morbid disorder.

Only two of the eight participants said that tutoring had helped them be successful at the community college level, and two of the eight participants said that counseling had helped them with social anxiety and the stressors of college life. Daniel described a specific experience where tutoring was helpful,

They [community college] had professional tutors, quite a few of them. They used to teach, and they moved to doing tutoring, so they knew what they were talking about. A lot of them had experienced the exact same coursework and assignments and stuff, so they knew exactly what was being looked for. I think that was definitely really helpful. (Daniel)

Valerie remembered her tutors name from community college and shared that the tutor had a significant impact on her education. She also emphasized the importance of one-on-one support.

Specialized time with someone in authority, whether it be a mentor, a faculty member, or whatever, that makes a difference. I actually like that a lot about the [university department of disabilities] where you just have that one-on-one time. (Vanessa)

Both Ian and Daniel honored counseling for a way to help with stress and anxiety, as well as learning to adapt to college life. Daniel said, "But once I was in the therapy, we worked on that [social anxiety], and I think now I'm able to make eye contact with conversations and talk to people and articulate." While Ian did not admit to counseling, he said it would be great for someone who found it difficult to meet new people. Ian spoke frequently and passionately about the need to socialize, experience college life, and try to overcome the need to avoid people. While he said he had not personally experienced that feeling, he knew many people with ASD did, and he knew that the university counseling services had helped them.

The student perceptions of student support services and the impact on success, the disabilities office was highly regarded, on a smaller scale, the counseling center, tutoring services and advising. It is important to note that what the students appeared to gain from these services was emotional support, encouragement to succeed, and help with adaptation. It was clear that they were comforted by support from an authority figure and saw one-on-one interaction as beneficial to their success.

Other Significant Findings

Student Response to a Strengths-Based Approach

It was very important to me as a researcher, to focus on the strengths of my participants. I found very little data in the research on the strengths of students with ASD, and much more data on the challenges. I had assumed that a more positive approach and the use of appreciative inquiry that focused on what was working rather than what wasn't, would help engage the students, and help them feel more comfortable with disclosure about their experiences. I found this approach to be even more effective than what was expected.

The participants in this study were given the option to meet via Zoom or face to face. As was expected, there was some apprehension with some of the participants, and many of them chose to keep their camera turned off for the initial interview. For example, Ian began the interview with his camera turned off, but by the end of the first interview, he had turned the camera on and was showing me around his dorm room.

While Stephen began his first interview with his camera turned off, he turned it on half-way through, and asked for the second interview to be face-to-face. In fact, five of the seven second interviews were requested to be in person, which was both surprising and enlightening. I found the students to evolve from the first interview to the next. Many

became more open, more vulnerable, and more expressive. The students were most expressive when their advice was requested, or when they were put in a hypothetical place of authority. For instance, the question asking, “If you were the college president” ... or “What advice would you give”

Daniel, the most reserved of the participants, increased his interview time by 100% with the second interview. Each participant approached the second interview with an eagerness and compliance that was not expected. Seven of the seven students with a second interview showed an interest in the results of the study and expressed gratitude for being a part of it. They appeared to be quite proud to share their experiences, and most especially, their suggestions and feedback.

This is a significant observation as student services personnel, researchers, and faculty members could obtain so much more information from students utilizing the appreciative inquiry approach. And more important, students with ASD can be encouraged to open up more, share their insights more, and thus increase self-confidence and ability to relate to others.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss transferability as elements that do not change through time and space. This finding can be adapted and used in multitudes of research settings with individuals with ASD. While an appreciative inquiry approach may be beneficial to research with many individuals, it is especially pertinent to this population as they have often faced a lot of adversity, may have self-doubt, and are often resistant to disclosure. It has been my goal to use thick, rich, description to allow the reader to get to know the participants within the context of their own experiences (Holloway,

1997) and share their stories, to inspire other researchers to continue to explore their world.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 presented analysis of the data collected from the interviews of eight successful students (success being defined as a successful transfer from a community college and acceptance into a top ranked research university) with ASD, in hopes to gain their perception of what has led to their success. Each participant was introduced along with the themes that emerged from the data. There were two research questions, and from each research question four concepts/themes emerged.

Determination, adapting skills, the utilization of special interests, and structure/planning developed into the themes for participant's perceptions of the internal factors that contributed to their success. Parental/Family support, student life involvement, faculty support, and support from other student services departments development into the themes for participant's perceptions of the external factors that contributed to their success. Chapter 5 will explore recommendations for practice and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

College students with ASD encounter many barriers to success, including difficulties with social interaction, poor organizational skills, information processing struggles, sensory issues, and communication hardships (Accardo et al., 2019; Accardo 2017; APA, 2013). Diagnostic criteria also include fixated interests, inflexible adherence to routines, and rigid thinking patterns (APA, 2013). These barriers often lead to a lack of progression in education despite an often-exceptional aptness for academics. This study explored the lived experiences of students with ASD who had successfully transferred from a community college to a top-ranked public research university.

Four themes emerged in response to each of the two research questions which asked for the student perceptions of the internal and external factors that led to their success. Each of the eight participants were unique in their own way, but also had a multitude of commonalities in their responses. They offered both their individual experiences, and suggestions that will help students with ASD going forward.

Research Question #1

What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the internal factors that contribute to their success?

Determination

Every participant in the study mentioned determination as an internal factor that had led to their success. There were different motivators for that determination, and there were different outcomes to the determination, but interestingly, they all mentioned that even in the worst of times (and they all mentioned difficult times), they found that they could persevere, the most significant outcome being excellence in academics.

When speaking of this determination, the topic consistently revolved around academics. When a participant became uncomfortable with a question involving another topic, shifting back to academics always encouraged them to continue sharing. It was clear that they were confident in this area, and their abilities in academics comforted them. This finding was in line with results from a study conducted by Accardo et al. (2019) who found students with ASD often perceive success to be earning good grades, having a balance between social life and academic life, achieving set goals, and increasing self-awareness. Anderson and Butt (2017) also shared how students tended to ignore other issues while celebrating academics. I found the same to be true with the participants in my study.

Community colleges can benefit from this information by encouraging students with ASD to utilize their propensity for academics for the good. Peer tutoring programs, faculty assistance programs, and community service where their academic skills are utilized could not only help students be successful, but also give a much-needed boost in confidence and could bolster social reciprocity in a way that is comfortable for the student. These successful students naturally gravitated toward academic pursuits and were comfortable and proud when they were able to share their expertise.

Students with ASD have been known to be determined in their thoughts, especially when the topic is important to them. While perhaps at times this characteristic may cause difficulties as when they are involved in an altercation or have a steadfast desire to reach an internal goal that doesn't align with another's goal, these students had turned that determination into triumph. The participants in this study turned the trait into a positive by not giving up in the face of adversity and staying on track to succeed

academically in college. Community college faculty and staff that recognize this determination can foster that fortitude by aligning student outcomes or objectives to assignments with the student's interest areas and passions.

While none of the students mentioned deficits in academic abilities, they did mention poor study skills. The academic challenges that were mentioned all had to do with getting assignments completed, staying on task, or failing to be prepared. These participants had all found a way to break through the barrier of poor study skills by creating structure and planning in their schedules, this became the next most significant theme for internal contributors to success

Planning/Structure

The students were soothed by planning and goal setting, and experienced anxiety when they did not feel prepared. Students with ASD appear to be calmed by routine and structure, as adherence to strict routines, and insistence on sameness is part of the diagnosis (APA, 2013). The participants in this study had discovered ways to alleviate stress by giving themselves structure and creating routines. For example, one student sat in the same seat every day in her classes and studied and completed assignments in the same location. Another student planned her schedule so that she would complete assignments for certain classes at the same time and on the same day. Again, these students had turned what may seem to be a deficit, to an advantage.

Seven out of the eight participants mentioned the importance of decreasing anxiety by planning. Some suggestions were visiting the campus early, getting assignments early, finding out where the classes are, where the buses are, where parking is located, etc. It is important for student services personnel to utilize the findings in this study to help students with ASD by encouraging the use of planning and

structure, the creation of routines, and offering opportunities for students to be prepared.

The successful students in this study found a way to lessen their anxiety by creating their own routines and structure. They had found a way to use their tendency towards detail and comfort in routine to adapt to their challenges. In fact, adaptation was mentioned several times by the participants as an important internal factor that helped them be successful.

Adapting Skills

Seven out of the eight students mentioned a history of significant challenges with social interactions and difficulty with study skills. The findings supported findings from a survey conducted by Anderson, et al., (2017) with 59 university students with autism, where they saw themselves having more non-academic challenges. That study found that students saw anxiety, social situations, and sensory issues as some of the significant obstacles they faced. Lizotte (2018) had similar findings based on interviews she had with college students with ASD. Themes that emerged from her study were, sensory concerns and social problems. The same challenges repeatedly appeared in the literature (Accardo et al., 2019; Anderson & Butt, 2017; Gillespie-Lynch, 2017).

Three of the eight students referred to sensory challenges in the community college classroom. However, these successful students had found ways to combat these barriers through adaptation. They perceived adaptation to be one of the leading contributors to their success. They did not see a significant difference between the community college and the university other than class size and the issues related to resident/apartment life, but they all discussed ways in which they learned to adapt at the community college level, which proved to be advantageous when entering the university

setting. They were very eager to share their ideas for adaptation, to include communicating with faculty regarding needs and challenges, using tools and techniques such as devices to cancel out sensory overload, the application of structure and routine to ease anxiety, and the utilization of student life activities related to interests in order to safely socialize,

Student interests developed into a very helpful tool for students. The students in the study often spoke of how they utilized their interests or passions to move ahead, or to lessen anxiety in an uncomfortable atmosphere. The utilization of these interests became the fourth theme in the internal factors that lead to success.

Utilization of Interests

The participants in this study, all successful community college students, tended to utilize what is documented in the DSM 5 as possible deficits of the disorder, for the positive. The DSM 5 (2013) lists restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus as one of the diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder. An example given is “excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests” (pg. 50). It is interesting to note that the DSM 5 (2013) also notes, “Specific interests may be a source of pleasure and motivation and provide avenues for education and employment later in life” (pg. 54). There is irony in the fact that the personal characteristics that may have caused adversity in the lives, may also have led to their success as college students.

Reis et al. (2021) found similar results when interviewing forty college students with ASD on the experiences that led them to successfully transfer from high school to college. One theme that emerged was the importance of interests and choice. Students found that when they were guided by their interests in academic areas, they were more

motivated and engaged. Faculty should be encouraged to teach to the interests of students whenever possible, allow students to explore and research their passions, and honor this trait. Student services personnel should keep this devotion to certain topics of interest in mind when working with students with ASD through planning classes, career development, and community outreach opportunities.

Another similarity between my study and the Reis et al. (2021) study was the fact that students identified relationships as being important in promoting their success. Reis et al (2021) list social networks as a theme that emerged from the study with high school students, social networks included peers, faculty, and family.

Research Question #2

What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the external factors that contribute to their success?

Parents/Family

Parents/Family was the highest ranked code in this study. Every participant spoke passionately about the support and encouragement they received from family members, and how this support helped them be successful college students. Every student told a story of how a parent had helped them persist when times were difficult. However, the participants were quick to share that their parents also allowed them the independence that they needed, while still being supportive. Parents of the participants in this study helped prepare the students for independent life, while remaining a strong, but quiet force in their lives.

There is much research focused on how difficult the transfer from high school to college can be since parents have been very involved in the student's education and

support structure in the K-12 setting, and college can leave a student on their own (Hendrickson, et al., 2017; Cullen, 2015).

In a two-year multi-university study, Accardo et al. (2019) similarly found students attributing parental support as a key to their success. A second factor that students perceived to be beneficial to their success in the Accardo et al. (2019) study was what they referred to as social networks. My study found involvement with student life to be a close second to familial support when it comes to the student's perception of the external factors that contributed to their success.

Student Life Involvement

Eight out of eight of the students were in some type of club at the community college, some more than one. Seven out of eight participants in this study listed social interactions as being significantly challenging for them, yet eight out of eight believed some form of student life involvement had something to do with their success. Their determination in wanting to do well encouraged them to engage in student life, even when it was difficult. Student life involvement was integral for some in gaining friendships and offering a means of socializing that was less aversive.

In line with my study, Accardo et al. (2019) conducted a multi university study where 48 university students gave their thoughts on their perceptions on barriers and pathways to success. One theme that developed from this study when discussing pathways to success was the development of a social network (to include engaging in campus activities, access to organized activities, and relationships with peers and professors).

Faculty Relationships

Every participant had a story to tell involving an experience with a faculty member, whether it was positive or negative. Faculty members make an impact on students, and they need to know how to relate to students with individual differences and what may seem to be challenging characteristics. Faculty members need to be encouraged to devote one-to-one time with students and understand the impact that their words and behaviors have on students.

The research does suggest that faculty are often unaware of the challenges that students with ASD face (Accardo et al., 2019; Anderson & Butt, 2017), and students often feel misunderstood by faculty (Gurbuz et al., 2017). While five of the eight participants had a positive faculty story to tell, some also had experiences with faculty that were not as positive. It became clear that faculty relationships impacted the participants whether the relationship was positive or negative.

Student Services

There were several support services mentioned when participants were asked to share some of the external contributors to their success, namely tutoring, counseling, advising, and the most common service mentioned, the office of disabilities. While some of them were encouraged/convinced to register with the department of disabilities by parents, all of them believed that this office had a positive impact on their success. The most positive benefit seemed to be support from the disabilities staff as opposed to accommodations. The most highly regarded accommodation was extra time on tests (even though it was used infrequently, students liked to know that it was there if needed), and prior knowledge of assignments. Wanting prior knowledge of the assignments, syllabus, readings, etc. tied into how these students felt the need for

planning and structure, but what seemed to be the most beneficial to the students, be it from faculty, disabilities staff, tutors, or counselors, was emotional support and encouragement.

Recommendations for Improved Practice

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of perceptions of students with ASD who had transferred from a community college and been accepted into a top ranked research university. The study explored their perceptions of the internal and external factors that led to their success. The themes of this study suggest that internal characteristics for students who are successful are determination, planning/structure, adapting skills, and the utilization of interests. The external factors, according to the students interviewed were parents/family, student life, faculty relationships, and student support services. Based on the findings of my study, I have made recommendations for community college student services and academic services personnel to compliment student perceptions found from the data.

Recommendation One

Provide orientation programs for new students transitioning from the high school to the community college or to the community college from home.

Students were very vocal about the need to be prepared, and the anxiety they felt in the absence of it. An orientation program prior to registration in their first year at community college will give them the opportunity to get to know the feel of the campus, find their classrooms, and find other student support service offices, as well as meet key people within those offices. Many students shared the need to have one-to-one contact with college personnel and this type of program will fulfill that need. The participants felt that the emotional support from authority figures, specifically faculty and disability office

personal, had been integral in their success. During the orientation program, students can be given one-to-one time with their professors and other staff members to give them confidence and a safe person to consult when they are in need.

While some universities offer transition programs for students with ASD, at the community college, not all students with ASD are coming straight from high school. While the transition from high school to college may seem challenging for students, students with ASD who are entering college years after high school graduation, may be particularly at risk. A three-to-four-day orientation program will capture the elements of each theme that was found in this study, while supporting not only the high school students, but non-traditional students with ASD.

Since students found parents to be such an important part of their success, parents need to be included in such a program, to help encourage students, and to help ease them into a more independent position. The participants in this study all had significant emotional support from their family members, however, they were quick to note that their parents were not suppressing their independence but acting in a role of supporter and sounding board. Parents could utilize support and guidance as they help navigate this transition.

Another integral part of the program should be to delve into the interests of the students, as utilizing interests seemed to be a factor in their success. The students need to be introduced to student life, clubs, and other extracurricular activities that the college has to offer. Every participant in this study was involved in student life in some way, and said this involvement was beneficial to helping them navigate challenges with socialization. Seven of the eight participants said this involvement caused anxiety and

trepidation from the start. An orientation program that introduced student life personnel and activities, would help ease the students with ASD into this involvement, and take away the need for the student to engage on their own.

An orientation program should include personnel from the office of disabilities, as every student in this study felt their success was partly due to the involvement with that office. The participants in the study all seemed very comfortable with the staff from the office of disabilities, perhaps this department, with the help of other student services staff, could conduct this orientation. The orientation program may serve to dispel myths related to registering with the department of disabilities and serve to answer any questions that the students may have about confidentiality, accommodations, and expectations.

An orientation program addressing every theme that was developed from this study could offer workshops on the internal factors that the students perceived to be as beneficial; determination, adaptation, planning/structure, and the utilization of interests. It could incorporate every external factor that the students saw as beneficial to their success, such as faculty relationships, the office of disabilities, other student services departments, and parents. Parents could be encouraged to transition from managers to supporters and be comforted in knowing that they will remain a constant in their child's success.

Student life personnel and faculty will be integral members in the orientation program, as will other student support services personnel. The participants in this study made it clear that being prepared in advance was important to them, and that reaching out was difficult. This orientation program will consist of departments reaching out to the

students, explaining the process of their services, where to find them, and how they will help the students be successful. The participants in this study were eager to help other students with ASD and felt uncomfortable when coupled with neurotypical students in group settings and mentorship programs. Current students with ASD should be included in this orientation, and can be utilized as mentors, presenters, and guides for new students with ASD.

Recommendation Two

Offer student workshops/seminars on resilience, time management, adapting skills, and career/interest inventories, planning/structure, social interaction, etc. The participants found their determination to succeed and endure hardships as an internal factor that led them to success. They found a way to prevail through the challenges faced by a student with ASD and did not give up in the face of adversity. They all had times in their lives where they felt defeated and discouraged, but they were able to continue because of skills taught to them by their parents, peers, or teachers.

The participants were able to transform their intense interests to their benefit by pursuing careers, student life activities, and assignment topics to fit those interests. Workshops that explored those interests and offered suggestions on how to utilize them could be quite beneficial. The participants in this study had determined how to use their tendency towards routine to help them with their studies and time management. Workshops that offer time management skills, ideas for structure and planning, and share the benefits of both could help other students with ASD. The successful students in this study had learned to adapt by their environment with the use of tools, techniques, and specific ways of thinking that led them to integrate more successfully in the college

community. A workshop that shares these tools, the benefits of adaptation, and techniques to adapt comfortably will help other students with ASD be successful. Faculty involvement in these workshops would be very beneficial, as students in the student continued to say that one-on-one faculty time was very important. While these workshops could be a part of an orientation program, they should be offered several times a semester, and altered based on student input. Allowing experienced students with ASD help run these workshops could not only assist in confidence for the students helping but give hope and encouragement for new students with ASD.

Recommendation Three

Offer staff and faculty development seminars on working with students on the autism spectrum. According to the students interviewed, faculty and staff attitudes, encouragement, and support, matter. Eight out of the eight students had a story to tell involving a faculty or staff member who was either very positive or not so positive, but impactful either way. Students with ASD often have difficulty speaking to faculty and their challenges can go unnoticed. Something that all students in this study had in common was that they found a way to interact with faculty on a one-to-one basis. Faculty development focused on understanding students with ASD, and techniques designed to help them interact with diverse student needs will benefit not only the ASD population, but all students. Introducing a student with ASD as a presenter, or a guest speaker during this workshop would be quite beneficial, as students with ASD want to be heard, are often quite articulate, and genuine, and create that personal element that is missing from learning about someone rather than from someone. The students who participated in this study felt empowered by being able to help others with their same struggles.

Recommendation Four

Expand the role of the office of disabilities. This research suggests that students are more successful when they are registered with the office of disabilities, however, research also suggests that most students do not want to self-report. Colleges can look at how their department is marketed, how it looks, where it is located, what it is called, and determine if there are any factors that could be a deterrent to students. If an orientation program is offered, how could this department be a part of it, what could this department do to encourage students to register? Students need to see the disabilities department as more than just a place to get accommodations. The participants in this study rarely used accommodations, but all saw the benefits of the department of disabilities, though guidance, support, and encouragement. Perhaps the department of disabilities could assess the accommodations that are being offered. Are these accommodations meeting the needs of the students with ASD? Are there other supports that could benefit them more? The participants in this study all had academic accommodations, but rarely used them. Academics was not a barrier for them, but what was a barrier were time management skills, difficulties with social interactions, navigating sensory overload, and anxiety surrounding college life in general. In line with my study, Accardo (2017) stressed that students with ASD consistently name non-academic barriers to success as their biggest challenge. These barriers were anxiety over change, doubts about self-disclosure, mental health issues, and awkwardness in social situations.

Disabilities staff should visit high school counselors and offer an orientation at the high school to get to know the students with ASD and assure them that they are there to help with more than simply academic accommodations. In collaboration with

recruitment, these staff members could help ease anxiety about college life for both students and parents and help students with ASD recognize the importance of reaching out for help. Transitioning from high school to college is a crucial time when a student may decide to shake the diagnostic label.

Recommendation Five

Expand student life offerings for students with ASD. This study as well as studies discussed in the literature, suggested that involvement in student life matters. All students in my study had been involved in student life in one way or another and all felt that this involvement had been beneficial to their success. The department of student life should develop surveys/focus groups to speak with students with ASD and determine their interests. Offering incentives for starting a club or developing a club that is specific to students on the spectrum would be beneficial. Every successful participant from this study had participated in a club that was specific to ASD students, and each one of them shared that the club had helped them with social skills, planning, and adaptation. Some had started their own clubs and were very proud of that accomplishment. Perhaps a club or organization with the community college setting would be helpful for students with ASD, and also help them to branch out to join other clubs. Students with ASD can be very intense and hyper-focused on an area of interest, this characteristic fit perfectly with student life involvement, and based on the findings of this study, utilizing interests had helped the students become successful. Forming a club of interests, satisfies both themes.

Recommendation Six

Student Services personnel should use a strengths-based approach when working with students with ASD. Students with ASD often have difficulties interacting

with others. They may be mistrustful as they have often had negative experiences with verbal communication as it is often difficult for them to practice reciprocity. The appreciative inquiry line of questioning, and strengths-based approach to this study brought out a more open, positive, and lengthy conversation than what was expected. Student services personal working with students with ASD, as well as researchers, faculty, and other college staff, would be wise to use this same approach with this population.

The appreciative inquiry approach also brought out many strengths from the participants. Not only were all the students gifted academically, but they possessed skills that turned their challenges into successes. For instance, students with ASD are known to be rigid in their thought patterns, and often meticulous to a fault, not to mention overly fixated on certain areas of interest. The students in this study were able to turn rigidity into determination, meticulousness into structure, and fixated interests into utilized interests. Students with ASD are not known to be flexible, but the students in this study had learned to adapt to an environment that did not understand them; they managed to utilize relationships with family, professors, and other students to better themselves; and while still struggling with some symptoms of ASD, found a way to adapt, become more self-aware, and succeeded in college.

Recommendations for Further Research

My findings suggest that community college students with ASD can be successful when given the opportunities, tools, techniques, and encouragement to use the talents that they possess to overcome obstacles. While in the last few years there has been more qualitative research with students with ASD, there has been very little at the community college level.

Recommendation One

Future research into the community college's role in preparing students for transfer to a university setting. Most research that is found with students with ASD is either performed at the high school (or younger level), or at the university level. There needs to be continued research in this area because we know that students with ASD are attending community college more than ever before, and they see the benefits of attending community college. Eight of the eight students in this study stated that having been to a community college prior to entrance into the university had helped them significantly. Some were not happy with the idea of attending the community college prior to the university at first, but in retrospect, felt it was a needed transition. Research that explores the success rate of high school students with ASD who go to the university vs those who go to the community college and transfer to the university could help students and parents in their decision, as well as comfort those that must attend community college. Three participants in the study were not given the option to go straight to the university and were initially bitter. They later realized that the two years of community college helped them towards their success.

Analyzing the appropriateness of the current accommodations for community college students with ASD is integral. While every participant in this study was registered with the office of disabilities in both the community college and the university, they claimed they rarely used the accommodations that were provided. Are there accommodations that are not being offered that could better prepare students for the university setting?

This study points to the benefit of registering with the office of disabilities, and student life involvement. How could community colleges encourage students with ASD

to consider registering with the office of disabilities? A qualitative study that explores the apprehension and aversion to self-disclosure is needed, as well as an analysis of successful community college programs for students with ASD. The research with students with ASD in community college has only scratched the surface.

Recommendation Two

Further inquiry into the benefits of certain accommodations for students with ASD. My study supported the prior research that suggests that students with ASD infrequently use the accommodations that are offered to them at the community college level. Further research on the effectiveness of the accommodations, and student's perception of their benefits could be helpful. Academic accommodations are by far the most frequently used accommodations and the most frequently offered accommodation, but they do not assist in what the students are saying are their biggest barriers. The participants noted they were most helped by having prior knowledge of assignments so that they can plan their assignments, and by being allowed more absences or breaks to combat anxiety and sensory overload, none of which are academic. Further analysis of non-academic accommodations is needed to gauge their benefits and to collaborate to find better ways to meet the needs of this population.

Recommendation Three

Further inquiry into the resistance to self-disclose. Further analysis of the hesitancy to self-disclose, and suggestions for ways to motivate self-disclosure will benefit this population. Seven of the eight participants in this study felt resistant to self-disclose their diagnosis, and some were still hesitant to share with even their closest friends. Knowing why students resist self-disclosure will help in determining ways to make this process easier. The participants in this study mentioned better marketing, an

analysis of the location of the department of disabilities, dispelling myths related to registering with the department of disabilities, and more education on the department of disabilities prior to registration as ways to foster self-disclosure. Further research that focuses on student's perceptions of the department of disabilities would be helpful as well as research that studies community college programs that have a high rate of registration for students with ASD.

Recommendation Four

Further inquiry into the experiences of non-traditional age students with ASD. While the participants in my study were all between the ages of 19 and 25, in the coming years we will see more individuals who have been diagnosed with ASD who are in the 30+ age range and may not have succeeded in college or may be entering community college for the first time. Research with these individuals will help colleges in program development, as well as help those individuals enter the workforce. With the onset of new programs and accommodations for students with ASD, more individuals may return to college in the upcoming years.

Recommendation Five

Research involving students from different types of higher education institutions. The participants from this study were enrolled in a large public research university. Research involving students with ASD who attend a private institution, a liberal arts college, vocational and career colleges, or same sex colleges, could benefit students and parents when making career and education choices. This study highlighted the importance of special interests, would an art college be more beneficial to those who love art, would a career and technical program that specializes in a

specific area of interest lead to more success? These questions should be answered in an attempt to help students with ASD be successful.

Limitations

Upon reflection of the data and content of my study I realized that there were some limitations. The findings of my study are restricted to those students who had registered with the office of disabilities. While every student in the study saw the office of disabilities as a factor in their success, there were no students interviewed who were not registered with this department. The most vulnerable part of the population (those who cannot bring themselves to self-disclose) did not have a voice in the study.

Another limitation for this study was in the fact that only students who were accepted into a top ranked research university were included. It is possible that these students had more parental support, a higher socioeconomic status, and more opportunities for resources. The institution had excellent resources for students with ASD, which is not the case with all colleges. A student who attended a smaller, liberal arts college, a private college, or a state college, are not represented.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of successful community college students with ASD when it came to external and internal factors that led to their success. Students perceived the internal factors that contributed to their success to be determination, planning/structure, adapting skills, and the utilization of interests. They perceived the external factors that contributed to their success to be parents/family, student life, faculty relationships, and student support services.

It is imperative that the research completed with students with ASD be utilized by community colleges as they continue to fall behind when it comes to services offered for these students. As evidenced in my interviews with successful students with ASD, they

have the tools that they need to be successful. Many students with ASD have not been given the opportunity to utilize the talents that they possess to move them forward. The early research that I have quoted in my study presented findings that were not much different, if at all, from the findings from the most recent studies when looking at barriers to success, challenges, student perceptions, and success rates. This tells me that within the last decade, there has not been a lot of progress in making changes to help support this population. There is so much potential among students with ASD, a myriad of often untapped talents squandered as the educational system has not quite determined how to best utilize these gifts and support these capable students.

I found the participants in this study to be engaged and ready to help, and all it took was for someone to believe in them, someone to emphasize their strengths, ask their advice, and show them that they matter. As the population of students diagnosed with ASD continues to grow, so does the need for services that will help them be the best that they can be. They have adapted to our world, maybe we can learn to adapt to theirs.

One way in which we can delve into this issue is more qualitative studies seeking help from those who are living the experience. They have a voice, a voice that has not been heard nearly enough. Hopefully, this study will be one of many to come where we seek endorsement from students with ASD and look to them to help solve this puzzle. This practice could be a turning point in future research and application.

APPENDIX A
DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR 299.00 AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive):

1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, ranging, for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understand relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history (examples are illustrative, not exhaustive; see text):

1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypes, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes, difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).
3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).
4. Hyper- or hyperreactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

Specify current severity: Severity is based on social communication impairments and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior

- C. Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).
- D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.

E. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level.

Note: Individuals with a well-established DSM-IV diagnosis of autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, or pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified should be given the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. Individuals who have marked deficits in social communication, but whose symptoms do not otherwise meet criteria for autism spectrum disorder, should be evaluated for social (pragmatic) communication disorder.

Specify if:

With or without accompanying intellectual impairment

With or without accompanying language impairment

Associated with a known medical or genetic condition or environmental factor

Associated with another neurodevelopmental, mental, or behavioral disorder

With catatonia (refer to the criteria for catatonia associated with another mental disorder for definition).

APPENDIX B
SEVERITY LEVELS FOR AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Level 3 (Requiring very substantial support)

Social Communication - Severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills cause severe impairments in functioning, very limited initiation of social interactions, and minimal response to social overtures from others. For example, a person with few words of intelligible speech who rarely initiates interaction and, when he or she does, makes unusual approaches to meet needs only and responds to only very direct social approaches.

Restricted, Repetitive Behaviors - Inflexibility of behavior, extreme difficulty coping with change, or other restricted/repetitive behaviors markedly interferes with functioning in all spheres.

Level 2 (Requiring substantial support)

Social Communication - Marked deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills, social impairments apparent even with supports in place; limited initiation of social interactions; and reduced or abnormal responses to social overtures from others. For example, a person who speaks in simple sentences whose interaction is limited to narrow special interests, and who has markedly odd nonverbal communication.

Restricted, Repetitive Behaviors - Inflexibility of behavior, difficulty coping with change, or other restricted/repetitive behaviors appear frequently enough to be obvious to the casual observer and interfere with functioning in a variety of contexts. Distress and/or difficulty changing focus or action.

Level 1 (Requiring support)

Social Communication - Without supports in place, deficits in social communication cause noticeable impairments. Difficulty initiating social interactions, and clear examples of atypical or unsuccessful responses to social overtures from others. May appear to have decreased interest in social interactions. For example, a person who is able to speak in full sentences and engages in communication but whose to-and-fro conversation with others fails, and whose attempts to make friends are odd and typically unsuccessful.

Restricted, Repetitive Behaviors - Inflexibility of behavior causes significant interference with functioning in one or more contexts. Difficulty switching between activities. Problems of organization and planning hamper independence.

APPENDIX C
RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hello,

My name is Barbara Kennedy, and I am a current doctoral student conducting a qualitative research study titled “Exploring Experiences of Successful Community College Students on the Autism Spectrum” (IRB#) at the University of Florida under the supervision of Dr. Kelly Peck Parrott. I am seeking to interview students who have transferred to the University of Florida from a community college.

The purpose of this study will be to understand the experiences of successful students on the autism spectrum attending community college. Each participant will do one introductory pre-meeting to determine interest and comfort level lasting about 30 - 60 minutes, and two follow up interview lasting 60 – 90 minutes. Each participant will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card to compensate for their time. Through this research, we hope to generate knowledge that will inform future research and practice.

If you are interested in participating, please reply to indicate your interest in participating in the study so that we can schedule an introductory interview.

If you have more questions about the study, please contact me at 321-433-5591 or kennedy.barbara@ufl.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Barbara Kennedy

APPENDIX D INFORMED CONSENT

Protocol Title: Experiences of successful students on the autism spectrum in a community college setting (IRB#).

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this study will be to understand the experiences of students on the autism spectrum that have been successful in community college campus.

What you will be asked to do in the study: An initial meeting with graduate student to determine interest in participating in this student. If agreed upon, participation in an individual interview led by a graduate student.

Time required: Approximately 60 -90 minutes

Risks and Benefits: This study will only involve no more than minimal risk for the participants. While the substance of the interview is not particularly sensitive and we will keep your identity confidential, there is always possible risk of re-identifying you. While there are no direct benefits for the participants, the data collected may have significance for future practice, research, and policy.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed, and the research team will take notes during the interviews. Data will be stored in secure locations using computer passwords and/or encryption. Your name will not be connected to your responses after the interview, or interviews, are transcribed with identifiers removed. After transcription,

the recordings will be destroyed. Additionally, you will be asked to not identify other people by name during the interview. Your quotes or paraphrases will be used in reports; however, you will be given a pseudonym, and the researchers will strive to avoid including anything that could identify you or others.

The final results will be presented in a dissertation for the University of Florida and might be sent to research journals or magazines for possible publication or used in research conference presentations.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Barbara Kennedy, Eastern Florida State College, 3865 North Wickham Rd., Melbourne, FL, 32935; phone 321-433-5591; email kennedy.barbara@ufl.edu

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

IRB02 Office, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 392-0433; email irb2@ufl.edu

I have read the procedure outlined above. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study and have received a copy of this description.

Participant's signature and date

Principle Investigator's signature and date

APPENDIX E INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you see as some of the experiences in your past that have contributed to your success?
2. What are some of your own personal motivators for success (what makes you want to be successful)?
3. How have you contributed to your own success?
4. What sets you apart from students that may not have been as successful?
5. What characteristics or traits do you possess that has helped you be successful in college?
6. How have interactions with others impacted your success in college?
7. What has been your most rewarding experience at the college?
8. Based on your own personal experience, what services would you provide for students with ASD, to help them be successful if you ran this college?
9. What supports have you utilized at the community college that has led you toward success?
10. What has the college done to help you be successful?
11. What people have been most influential in helping you succeed in college?
12. If you were to give advice to a new student with ASD on how to be a successful college student, what you tell them?

APPENDIX F THEME DEVELOPMENT

A NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE PERCEPTIONS OF SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH ASD				
<i>Theme Development</i>				
Research Question#1: What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the internal factors that contribute to their success?				
Theme 1: Determination			Theme 2: Planning	
Category: Academics	Category: Persistence	Category: Reaction to negative feedback	Category: Structure	Category: Preparedness
Codes:	Codes:	Codes:	Codes:	Codes:
Study	Success	Prove them wrong	Contradictory messages	Planner
GPA	Professional Status	Show everyone	Detail Oriented	Calendar
Assignments	Completion	Bullies	Specific	Receiving Assignments Early
Grades	Sense of Importance	Overcome obstacles	Anxiety in chaos	Accommodations
Scholarships	Perservere			Anxiety of the unknown
Achievement	Goals			
Theme 3: Adapting Skills			Theme 2: Utilizing Interests	
Category: Self-Awareness	Category: Tools	Category: Facing hardship	Category: Passions	Category: Motivation
Codes:	Codes:	Codes:	Codes:	Codes:
Fitting in	Creating Structure	Forced myself	Taking interesting courses	Research
Finding what works	Noise cancelling devices	Just did it	Connecting with like people	Desire to learn more
Being observant	Online classes	Learning to self-disclose	Degree selection	Practical Experience
Finding alternatives	Rewards	Justify social interaction	Hobbies	Makes studying fun
Learning styles	Environmental Setting	Bullies		
Changing interpretations				

Research Question#2: What do successful community college students with ASD perceive to be the external factors that contribute to their success?				
Theme 1: Family			Theme 2: Student Life	
Category: Parents	Category: Siblings	Category: Other Relatives	Category: Clubs	Category: Events
Codes:	Codes:	Codes:	Codes:	Codes:
Mom	Sister	Cousin	Social skills club	Parties
Dad	Brother	Grandparents	Student Government	Tailgating
			Psychology Club	Music Events
			Brain Bowl	Organized Events
			Tennis Club	Yoga
			Engineering Club	
Theme 3: Faculty Relationships			Theme 2: Student Services	
Category: Faculty Advice	Category: Faculty Support	Category: Negative Impact from Faculty	Category: Disabilities Office	Category: Other Student Services Departments
Codes:	Codes:	Codes:	Codes:	Codes:
Help with Career	Accommodations	Lack of structure	Lifesaver	Tutoring
Help with Assignments	Office Hours	Missunderstanding	Couldn't finish without them	Advicing
Assisting with environment	Flexibility	Judging	Supportive	Counseling
Assiting with Clubs	Understanding	Didn't like me	Always there for me	
Recommendations	Being Direct	Aversive to me	Learning Specialist	
	Kindness			

Data Summary Table										
	Descriptors									
Participants	Academics	Persistence	egative Feedb	Structure	Preparedne ss	Self-Awareness	Tools	Facing Hardship	Passions	Motivation
Brooklyn	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cody	X	X	X	X				X	X	X
Daniel	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Ian	X	X	X		X			X	X	X
Jeremy	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X
Sophie	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Stephen	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Vanessa	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Frequency	8/8	8/8	5/8	6/8	6/8	5/8	6/8	8/8	8/8	8/8
Participants	Parents	Siblings	Relatives	Clubs	Events	Faculty Advice	Faculty Support	Negative Impact from Faculty	Disabilities Office	Other Student Services
Brooklyn	X	X		X		X	X		X	X
Cody	X			X				X	X	
Daniel	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Ian	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Jeremy	X	X		X	X		X		X	X
Sophie	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	
Stephen	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Vanessa	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Frequency	8/8	5/8	2/8	8/8	6/8	5/8	6/8	6/8	8/8	5/8

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Accardo, A. L. (2017). College-bound young adults with ASD: Self-reported factors promoting and inhibiting success. *College of Education Faculty Scholarship*, 9. Retrieved from https://rdw.rowan.edu/education_facpub/9/
- Accardo, A. L., Bean, K., Cook, B., Gilies, A., Edgington, R., Kuder, S.J., & Bomgardner, E. M. (2019). College access, success, and equity for students on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04205-8>
- Accardo, A.L., Kuder, S.J., & Woodruff, J. (2018). Accommodations and support services preferred by college students with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*, 23(3), 574-583. doi:10.1177/1362361318760490
- Alverson, C.Y., Lindstrom, L.E., & Hirano, K.A. (2019). High school to college: Transition experiences of young adults with autism. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 34(1), 52-64.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.
- American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.
- American Psychiatric Association. (1987). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (3rd ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.
- American Psychiatric Association. (1980). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association.
- Anderson, A.H., Carter, M., & Stephenson, J. (2017). Perspectives of university students with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48, 651-665. doi:10.1007/s10803-017-3257-3
- Anderson, A.H., Stephenson, J., & Carter, M. (2017). A systematic literature review of the experiences and supports of students with autism spectrum disorder in post-secondary education. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 39, 33-53. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/j.rasd.2017.04.002>
- Anderson, A.M., Cox, B.E., Edelstein, J., & Andring, A.W. (2019). Support systems for college students with autism spectrum disorder. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 37(1), 14-27
- Anderson, C. & Butt, C. (2017). Young adults on the autism spectrum at college: Successes and stumbling blocks. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47, 3029-3039. doi:10.1007/s10803-017-328-x

- Anderson, K.A., Roux, A.M., Kuo, A., & Shattuck, P.T. (2018). Social-ecological correlates in adult autism outcome studies: A scoping review. *Pediatrics*, *141*(4), 306-317
- Autism spectrum disorder. (2018, Jan. 06). *Mayo Clinic*. Retrieved from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/autism-spectrum-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20352928#:~:text=Overview,and%20repetitive%20patterns%20of%20behavior>.
- Bakker, T.C., Krabbendam, L, Bhulai, S, & Begeer, S. (2020). First-year progression and retention of autistic students in higher education: A propensity score-weighted population study. *Autism in Adulthood*, *2*(4), 307-316. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0053>
- Bernard, H.R., & Ryan, G.W. (2010). *Analyzing Qualitative Data: Systematic Approaches*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publishers.
- Bernard, H.R., Wutich, A., & Ryan, G.W. (2016). *Analyzing Qualitative Data: Systematic Approaches*, 2nd ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publishers.
- Bolourian, Y., Zeedyk, S.M., & Blacher, J. (2018). Autism and the university experience: Narratives from students with neurodevelopmental disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *48*, 3330-3343. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3599-5>
- Brown, K. (2017a). Accommodations and support services for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD): A national survey of disability resource providers. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, *30*(2), 141-156.
- Brown, K. (2017b). Accessibility and students with autism spectrum disorder: Legal perspectives in the United States. In Alphin, H.C., Livine, J., & Chan, R.Y. (Eds.) *Disability and Equity in Higher Education Accessibility*, 81-102. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Brown, K.R. & Coomes, M.D. (2016). A spectrum of support: Current and best practices for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at community colleges. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *40*(6), 465-479.
- Cage, E., Di Monaco, J., & Newell, V. (2019). *Autism*, *23*(6), 1375-1383. doi:10.1177/13622361318811290
- Camarena, P.M. & Sarigiani, P.A. (2009). Postsecondary educational aspirations of high-functioning adolescents with autism spectrum disorders and their parents. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, *24*(2), 15-128. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1088357609332675>

- Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2021, Dec. 3). Morbidity and mortality weekly report. Prevalence and characteristics of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 8 years – autism and developmental disabilities monitoring network, 11 sites, United States, 2018. *Surveillance Summaries*, 70(11), 1-16. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/ss/ss7011a1.htm>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2020, March 27). Morbidity and mortality weekly report. Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 8 years-autism and developmental disabilities monitoring network. *Surveillance Summaries*, 69(4), 1–12. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/ss/ss6904a1.htm?s_cid=ss6904a1_w
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2013, May 17). Mental health surveillance among children – United States, 2005-2011. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 62(2), 1-40. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/other/su6202.pdf>
- Chandroo, R., Strnadova, I., & Cumming, T.M. (2018). A systematic review of the involvement of students with autism spectrum disorder in the transition planning process: Need for voice and empowerment. *Research Developmental Disabilities*, 83, 8-17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2018.07.011>
- Chase, S. (2008). Narrative inquiry: Multiple lenses, approaches, voices. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (p. 57–94). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Colclough, M.M. (2018). Exploring student diversity: College students who have autism spectrum disorders. Inquiry: *The Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges*, 21(1). Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1224773.pdf>
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2 -14. <https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0013189X019005002>
- Cooperrider, D.L., Whitney, D., & Stavros, J.M. (2008). *The appreciative inquiry handbook: For leaders of change*. New Brunswick, OH: Crown Custom Publishing.
- Cox, B.E., Thompson, K., Anderson, A., Mintz, A., Locks, T., Morgan, L., ... Wolz, A. (2017). College experiences for students with autism spectrum disorder: Personal identity, public disclosure, and institutional support. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(1), 71-87.
- Cullen, J.A. (2015). The needs of college students with autism spectrum disorders and Asperger’s syndrome. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 28(1), 89-101. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1066322.pdf>

- Daniels, A.M. & Mandell, D.S. (2014). Explaining differences in age at autism spectrum disorder diagnosis: A critical review. *Autism*, 18(5), 583-597, doi:10.1177/1362361313480277
- Davidson, M. (2017). Vaccination as a cause of autism – myths and controversies. *Dialogues in Clinical Neurosciences*, (19(4), 403-407. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5789217/>
- Elias, R. & White, S.W. (2018). Autism goes to college: understanding the needs of a student population on the rise. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48, 732-746.
- Frith, U. & Happe (2005). Autism spectrum disorder. *Current Biology*, 15(19), 786-790.
- Gellar, N.W., Cascio, A.A., Madaus, J.W., & Reis, S.M. (2021). A systematic review of the research on gifted individuals with autism spectrum disorder. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 1(11). doi. 10.1177/00169862211061876.
- Gellar, N.W., Shefyck, A., & Reichow, B. (2015). A comprehensive survey of current and former college students with autism spectrum disorders. *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine*, 88, 45-68.
- Gillespie-Lynch, K., Bisson, J.B., Saade, S., Obeid, R., Kofner, B., Harrison, A.J., Daou, N., Tricarico, N., Santos, J.D., Pinkava, W., & Jordan, A. (2021). If you want to develop an effective autism training, ask autistic students to help you. *Autism*, September 2021. doi.10.1177/13623613211041006
- Gillespie Lynch, K., Bublitz, D., Donachie, A., Wong, V., Brooks, P.J., & D’Onofrio, J. (2017). For a long time, our voices have been hushed: Using student perspectives to develop supports for neurodiverse college students. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00544>
- Gobbo, K. & Shmulsky, S. (2016). Autistic identity development and postsecondary education. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 36(3). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309033906_Autistic_Identity_Development_and_Postsecondary_Education
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (p. 105–117). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Gurbuz, D., Hanley, M., & Riby, D.M. (2019). University students with autism: The social and academic experiences of university in the UK. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 49, 617-631.
- Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in education settings*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

- Hendrickson, J.M., Woods-Groves, S., Rodgers, D.B. & Datchuk, S. (2017). Perceptions of students with autism and their parents: The college experience. *Education and the Treatment of Children*, 40(4), 571-596.
- Highlen, D. (2017). Helping students with autism spectrum disorder at the community college: What does the research say? What can you do? *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 41(7), 447-454.
- Hillier, A., Goldstein, J., Murphy, D., Trietsch, R., Keeves, J., Mendes, E., & Queenah, A. (2018). Supporting university students with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*, 22(1), 20-28.
- Holloway, I. (1997). *Basic Concepts for Qualitative Research*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hull, I, Petrides, K.V., Allison, C., Smith, P., Baron-Cohen, S., Lai, Meng-Chuan & Mandy, W. (2017). Putting on my best normal: Social camouflaging in adults with autism spectrum conditions, *Journal of Autism Developmental Disorders*, 47, 2519-2534. doi: 10.1007/s10803-017-3166-5
- Jackson, S.L., Hart, L., Brown, J.T., & Vokmar, F.R. (2018). Brief report: Self-reported academic, social, and mental health experiences or post-secondary students with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48(3), 643-650.
- Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. L. (2014). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education: fundamental elements and issues*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kanner, L. (1943) Autistic disturbances of affective contact. *Nervous Child*, 2, 217-250. Retrieved from https://neurodiversity.com/library_kanner_1943.pdf
- Kuder, S.J. & Accardo, A. (2018). What works for college students with autism spectrum disorder? *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48, 722-731.
- Lessard, S., Caine, V. & Clandinin, D.J. (2018). Exploring neglected narratives: Understanding vulnerability in narrative inquiry. *Irish Educational Studies*, 37(2), 191-204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2018.1465835>
- Lizotte, M. (2018). I am a college graduate: Postsecondary experiences as described by adults with autism spectrum disorders. *International Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(4), 179-191. doi: 10.18488/journal.61.2018.64.179.191
- Lyons, V. & Fitzgerald, M. (2007). Asperger (1906) and Kanner (1894-1981), the two pioneers of autism. *Journal of Autism Development Disorders*, 37, 2022-2023.

- Maenner M, Shaw, K.A., Bakian, A.V., Bilder, D.A., Durkin, M.S., Esler, A., Furnier, S.M., Hallas, L., Hall-Lande, J. Hudson, A., Hughes, M.M., Patrick, M., Pierce, K., Poynter, J.n., Salindas, A., Shenouda, J., Vehorn, Al, Warren, Z, Constantino, J.M., DiRienzo, M., ... Cogswell, M.E., . (2021). Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years – ADDM Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2018. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/ss/ss7011a1.htm>
- Maenner M, Shaw K, Baio J, Washington, A., Patrick, M., DiRienzo, Christensen, D.L., Wiggins, L.D., Pettygrove, S., Andrews, J.G., Lopez, M., Hudson, A., Baroud, T., Schewenk, Y., White, T., Rosenberg, C.R., Lee, L., Harrington, R.A., Huston, M. ... Dietz, P.M. (2020). Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 8 Years – ADDM Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2016. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/ss/ss6904a1.htm>
- McKeon, B., Alpern, C.S. & Zager D. (2013). Promoting academic engagement for college students with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 26(4), 363-366.
- Merriam, S.B., & Tisdell, E.J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam-Webster (n.d.) Citation. *In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/neurotypical>
- Miele, A.M., Kelley, J.W., & Hamrick, F.A. (2018). Different is not deficient: Addressing student conduct concerns among residential college students with autism spectrum disorder. *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 44(3), 30-45.
- Moody, E.J., Zittleman, L., Harris, B., & Nease, D.E. (2019). It's time for a change!: The appreciative/bootcamp translation to address disparities in the Latino community with autism spectrum disorders. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 25(1), 113-122.
- Myrvold, R., Kang-Y, C., Frederick, C.K., Nehilla, L., Closson, J.S. & Locke, J. (2021) Understanding the experiences of autistic college students: An exploratory mixed-methods analysis. *International Journal of Autism & Related Disabilities: IJARD-148*. doi: 10.29011/2642-3227.000048.
- Nurske, A., Rillotta, F., Bellon, M., & Richdale, A. (2019, February 25). Transition to higher education for students with autism: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://psycnet-apa.org.lp.hscl.ufl.edu/fulltext/2019-09818-001.pdf?sr=1>

- Ousley, O. & Cermak, T. (2014). Autism spectrum disorder: Defining dimensions and subgroups. *Current Development Disorders Reports*, 1, 20-28. Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s40474-013-0003-1.pdf>
- Quaye, S.J. & Harper, S.R. (2015). *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rando, H., Huber, M.J., & Oswald, G.R. (2016). An academic coaching model intervention for college students on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 29(3), 237-262.
- Rasmussen, P.S. & Pagsberg, A.K. (2019). Customizing methodological approaches in qualitative research on vulnerable children with autism spectrum disorders. *Societies*, MDPI, 9(4), 1-16.
- Reis, S.M., Gellar, N.W. & Madaus, J.W. (2021). Understanding the academic success of academically talented college students with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-05290-4>
- Rosen, N.E., Lord, C., & Volkmar, F.R. (2020) The diagnosis of autism: From Kanner to DSM-III to DSM-5 and beyond. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-04904-1>
- Roux, A.M., Shattuck, P.T., Rast, J.E., Rava, J.A., Edwards, A.D., Wei, X., ... Yi, J.W. (2015a). Characteristics of two-year college Students on the autism spectrum and their support services experiences. *Autism Research and Treatment*, Article ID 391693. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/391693>
- Roux, A. M., Shattuck, P.T., Rast, J. E., Rava, J. A., & Anderson, K. A. (2015b). *National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood*. Philadelphia, PA: Life Course Outcomes Research Program, A.J. Drexel Autism Institute.
- Sandford, C., Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R., Knokey, A., ... Yen, S.J. (2011). *The post-high school outcomes of young adults with disabilities up to 6 years after high school key findings from the national longitudinal transition study-2 (NLTS2)*. Retrieved from https://thinkcollege.net/sites/default/files/files/resources/nlts2_report_2011_09_complete.pdf
- Shattuck, P., Sterzing, P.R., Narendorf, S.C., & Wagner, M. (2012). Postsecondary education and employment among youth with an autism spectrum disorder. *Pediatrics*, 129(6), 1042-1049.

- Shmulsky, Gobbo, K., & Donahue, A. (2015). Groundwork for success: A college transition Program for students with ASD. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 28(2), 235-241. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1074676.pdf>
- Someki, F., Miyuki, Torii, Brooks, P.J., Koeda, T. & Gillespie-Lynch, K. (2018). Stigma associated with autism among college students in Japan and the United States: An online training study. *Research in Developmental Disabilities Journal*, 76, 88-98. doi: 10.1016/j.ridd.2018.02.016
- Stagg, S.D. & Belcher, H. (2019). Living with autism without knowing: Receiving a diagnosis later in life. *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, 7(1), 348-361. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21642850.2019.1684920>
- Stronach, S., Wiegand, S., & Mentz, E. (2019). Brief report: Autism knowledge and stigma in university and community samples. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 49, 1298-1302.
- Toor, N., Hanley, T., & Hebron, J. (2016). The facilitators, obstacles and needs of individuals with autism spectrum conditions assessing further and higher education: A systematic review. *Journal of Psychologist and Counselors in Schools*, 26(2), 166-190.
- U.S. Department of Education (USDE), National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). The condition of education 2019 (NCES 2017-144, Undergraduate Retention and Graduation Rates. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019144.pdf>
- van 't Hof, M., Tisseur, C., van Berckeleer-Onnes, I., van Nieuwenhuyzen, A., Daniels, A. M., Deen, M., Hoek, H. W., & Ester, W. A. (2021). Age at autism spectrum disorder diagnosis: A systematic review and meta-analysis from 2012 to 2019. *Autism*, 25(4), 862–873. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320971107>
- Venezia, A. & Jaeger, L. (2013). Transitions from high school to college. *Future of Children*, 23(1), 117-136.
- White, S.W., Elias, R., Salinas, C.E., Capriola, N., Conner, C.M., Asselin, S.B., ... Getzel, E.E. (2016). Students with autism spectrum disorder in college: Results from a preliminary mixed method needs analysis. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 56, 29-40.
- Whitney, D. & Trosten-Bloom, A. (2010). *The power of appreciative inquiry: A practical guide to positive change*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publications, Inc.
- Wolf, S. (2004). The history of autism. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 13, 201-208.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Barbara Kennedy received her Ed.D. in Higher Education Administration from the University of Florida in 2022. She serves as the Dean of Students at Eastern Florida State College (EFSC). She was a full-time tenured professor at the college, teaching psychology, abnormal psychology, developmental psychology, human adjustment, careers in psychology, and more, until she went into administration. She is currently still teaching as an adjunct professor for EFSC.

The highlights of her career have been partnering with community members to make EFSC one of the most successful Green Dot Colleges, fighting all forms of personal power-based violence; creating the first Social and Human Services Degree programs in Domestic Violence and Aging at the community college level in Florida, and partnering with a local university to host a Fulbright Scholar from Turkey in the field of psychology.

Barbara is also a licensed mental health counselor for the state of Florida, specializing in substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, and adults with autism. She is on the Board of the Brevard Homeless Coalition and the Students in Transition Committee with Brevard Public Schools.