

“I Found My Place”: Unraveling Autistic Community College Students’ Experiences  
in a College Autism Transition Program

By

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## Abstract

The emergence of college autism transition programs, aimed to support students' needs and leverage their strengths, is illuminating the rise of autistic students in academia. Raising acceptance of autistic college students, and truly understanding their experiences in navigating higher education, has been minimally addressed. Even more, few empirical studies have examined a *community* college autism transition program, lest been authored by an autistic individual. This qualitative case study unpacks how autistic community college students enrolled in a college autism transition program navigate higher education. The project began with a systematic literature review of autism in higher education that informed the study's theory (Neurodiversity), varied participant groups, (e.g., autistic students, college administrators) and methods (e.g., interviews, written reflections). The findings offer context on the priorities and issues facing the college at the heart of this study before explaining the specific autism program's evolution. Shedding light on each of the 13 autistic college student participants' life journeys via vignettes enables understanding of their successes and struggles en route to college. Findings are then presented to showcase how autistic students: process their identities; traverse through college (including handling academics and weighing parental involvement); navigate the autism program; handle their health and emotions; and figure out the future. The discussion demonstrates how the findings contextualize, challenge, and extend current understandings of Neurodiversity Theory. Implications for policy and practice are targeted to offer tangible and accessible measures for educators, program staff, and institutional leaders in serving autistic community college students, whereas implications for researchers and directions for future research lend clarity on how to enhance scholarship.



## Chapter I: Introduction

As autistic individuals<sup>1</sup> set forth for attaining postsecondary education experience, the odds of reaching academic and professional success may appear limited, even despite the inordinate number of unique strengths and skillsets they can lend to society. Compared to students with other disabilities, autistic students have higher rates of unemployment and underemployment following high school, as well as experience lower rates of postsecondary education attendance (Shattuck et al., 2012). However, their enrollment in postsecondary education is gradually increasing. The most recent report from the Digest of Education Statistics that tracked autistic college students found that 50.7% of autistic students who had received special education services in high school had graduated any type of postsecondary institution (within eight years) with some type of diploma, certificate, or license (Snyder et al., 2016). Though this statistic fails to disaggregate specific credentials obtained, the numbers illustrate the proportions of these students who are beginning to use postsecondary education as a platform for developing new skills, identifying specialties, and establishing their careers. Consequently, sustained college attendance may have long-term impacts on building stable, more highly paid employment, and even pursuing further education.

The actual prevalence of autistic college students remains to be seen due to poor tracking at both the postsecondary and national levels, complemented by low self-disclosure rates among

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<sup>1</sup> For this research, I use identity-first language like “autistic students,” recognizing that individuals have varying preferences. This terminology embraces autism as a core part of an individual’s identity, and also acknowledges that many people do not see themselves as “having autism,” much like people would not say they “have (insert other disability or minoritized identity here).” Consequently, I use this language throughout the manuscript, even in place of how authors described their own populations of autistic students (sometimes seen as “Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) students” or “students on the autism spectrum”).

autistic college students. However, White et al. (2011) estimate that up to two percent of college students may meet the criteria for having high-functioning autism. Though this language of “functioning” fails to account for the diversity of individuals who identify as autistic, with some not using those specific labels, this data – albeit now outdated – speaks to the increased presence of autistic college students.

Over recent years there has been an emergence of studies centered on perceptions and experiences of autistic college students. However, these tend to involve participants *other* than autistic individuals (e.g., neurotypical peers, parents, college personnel; see Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Dymond et al., 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Morrison et al., 2013). Some studies, though, have relayed autistic college students’ perspectives and lent valuable firsthand insights into how they navigate postsecondary education.

Understanding the experiences of autistic community college students bears much significance, in part due to 2-year colleges seeing an influx of autistic students. Autistic students attend 2-year institutions at much higher rates than at 4-year institutions (32.2% v. 17.4%; Snyder et al., 2016). In fact, Wei et al. (2014) found that 81% of autistic college students had attended a 2-year college at some point in their postsecondary education experiences. Yet these colleges often lack the mechanisms (e.g., transition programming, robust student life) to support autistic students in their academics and lives more generally.

*College autism transition programs 2*– an umbrella term I use to describe college-based programs designed to solely support autistic students – are in existence, though research has

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2 In Cox et al. (2020a) and Nachman et al. (2021), the term *autism-specific college support programs (ASPs)* is used as another term to encapsulate all of these autism-centered programs based in higher education institutions. While I support the ASPs verbiage, I aim to honor the original wording that I crafted in my dissertation – *college autism transition programs* – which I wrote concurrently as these other pieces were in development.

largely been based at 4-year institutions (e.g., Ames et al., 2016; Roberts & Birmingham, 2017). While these programs appear effective in supporting students with elements of their college experiences, such as building self-advocacy skills and social skills, they often fail to account for students' other overlapping identities and career pathways. Moreover, programs completely disregard the specific academic trajectories of transfer-bound or recently-transferred students.

It is imperative that community colleges act proactively and thoughtfully in meeting students' needs, desires, and objectives. Considering the paucity of studies that capture data about autism in community colleges (for exceptions, see Nachman & Brown, 2020; Peña & Kocur, 2013; Wei et al., 2014), there is a major gap in the literature. I have pinpointed a particular area of need and investigation: the experiences of autistic community college students enrolled in a college-based autism transition program. To date, no published literature has examined this singular topic.

### **Research Question**

The main research question for my dissertation is to discover the following: how do autistic community college students enrolled in a college autism transition program navigate higher education?

### **Significance**

Clearly, high proportions of autistic students are enrolled at community colleges, yet may lack proper supports. Engaging in inquiry regarding how a community college autism transition program, among other factors, can contribute to autistic community college students' experiences is both notable and necessary. That said, what only makes a gap in the literature important to fill is if a need exists. My dissertation extends the literature by accounting for the

unique nature of the community college setting and the autism program, among other factors, in moderating autistic students' lives and trajectories.

Through unraveling the intricacies of a community college autism transition program, we work to identify its most crucial elements that support students along their unique pathways. In this process we also prioritize understanding the experiences of autistic community college students, disentangling the complexities of their college journeys, from the academics and campus life components to their identity development. Moreover, by gathering perspectives from other important stakeholders who impact autistic students' lives – whether relatives and friends who know them best, or even institutional personnel, by virtue of the ramifications that result from their policies and positions of power – we curate a well-rounded picture of the landscape where the program inhabits. Such knowledge will collectively enable community college practitioners to determine how to allocate appropriate resources – or develop resources, for that matter – that will meet students' individual objectives.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

In preparing to establish my dissertation, I elected to conduct a systematic review of the literature on autism in higher education. I determined that this would be effective in not only uncovering insights about how current scholarship addresses autistic college students, but also unveil uncharted spaces in studying this subject matter, particularly within a community college context.

This systematic review of the literature on autism in higher education is distinct for a few reasons. First, while some examples of reviews are in existence (e.g., Anderson et al., 2017), they sometimes fail to critically engage with the literature and include dissertations as part of their sample, which lack the same peer review process as journal articles. Second, I provide

recommendations regarding how fellow researchers can more thoughtfully and thoroughly capture the experiences of autistic students in higher education, especially in conjunction with their faculty and neurotypical<sup>3</sup> peer colleagues. This appeared lacking in a few existing systematic reviews (e.g., Anderson et al., 2017; Gelbar et al., 2014), though Cox et al. (2020b) have aimed to more explicitly spotlight such suggestions. Third, as the basis of my dissertation work is to shed light on autism in community colleges, this review recognizes the shortage of scholarship on autistic community college students and reinforces the vitality of understanding how community colleges can establish and maintain these students' success. Nonetheless, our insights are limited to the minimal research that exists. In total, this systematic review works to more comprehensively understand, capture, and translate knowledge on the full scope of the experiences, identities, and pathways that encompass the lives of autistic students in postsecondary education. Thus, the argument for, and the novelty of, studying autistic students within a community college autism transition program becomes explicit.

### **Developing the Literature Database**

In developing the foundation of my systematic literature review, I wanted to capture a vast number of studies on autism in postsecondary education, albeit with limits. Here I outline the particular steps and strategies I employed in collecting and interpreting the data. I begin by discussing the process of identifying articles. Next I detail my inclusion and exclusion criteria. Later I describe my analytical process in examining the curated articles. More details about the categories encapsulated in the search are found in Table 1.

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<sup>3</sup> *Neurotypical* has been used by many scholars who cover autism in higher education (e.g., Ness, 2013; Sarrett, 2018) to represent as a counterpoint to individuals who identify as neurodiverse (e.g., Blume, 1998), among them autistic students.

### *Article Search*

During August 2018, when I enacted my first iteration of collecting articles, I searched through four electronic databases: ERIC, JSTOR, ProQuest Research Library, and Scopus. I kept my search limited to the following combination of keywords, which could be featured anywhere within the text: (*autism OR Asperger*) AND (*college OR university OR higher education OR postsecondary education OR post-secondary education OR community college OR two-year college OR 2-year college*). The first keyword represented the diagnosis, whether following the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (DSM-5; APA, 2013), which views Autism Spectrum Disorder more overarching term including more specific diagnoses like Asperger's, or the more outdated Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR; APA, 2000), which viewed Asperger's as its own, separate diagnosis. For the second keyword, I used a variety of keywords to elicit a wide pool of pieces situated in the world of postsecondary education. This process amounted to 64 keyword combinations across four unique platforms (16 each). Upon ruling out articles that did not meet my inclusion criteria, this search yielded 76 journal articles.

At this point, I searched through particular journals, as systematic reviews need not be limited to using electronic databases (Denyer & Tranfield, 2008). I reviewed three community college journals (*Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *Community College Review*, and *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*) due to the preponderance of students enrolled in these institutions (Snyder et al., 2016), as well as three journals that encompassed the most common scholarly homes for autism journals that have featured pieces about postsecondary education: *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disorders*, *Journal*

*of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, and *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*. This step yielded only one additional article.

At the end of December 2018, I conducted a second search to identify articles that had been published during the remainder of the calendar year. This search involved reviewing the same databases, as well as employing Google Scholar and University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, in an effort to expand the potential scope. Eight additional articles were included. Later, at the end of December 2019, I employed a third search to pinpoint articles published during 2019. I engaged in the same aforementioned techniques, and this yielded 22 more articles. In total, 107 articles were included in the review; for more context, look at Table 2. Beyond the systematic review, I have been keeping up to date with the literature and include some articles published in 2020.

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

Articles were required to meet all six of the following criteria for inclusion in this review. First, only peer-reviewed journal articles were retained. Second, akin to the rationale by Kim (2017), I only retained studies that were published after 1990, when autism was initially incorporated in federal special education law; I collected articles published as recently as 2018. I established this strict end date to keep the search both manageable and realistic (Brunton et al., 2017). Third, articles had to include empirical research or serve as a case study of a college. Fourth, content needed to center on autism; therefore, developmental and intellectual disabilities, as well as Neurodiversity more broadly, fell outside of scope. Fifth, studies had to be primarily situated at one or multiple higher education institutions, or centered on autism in postsecondary education, as in the case of some studies of online content (e.g., Anderson, 2018). Should studies not be framed within a college, though were concentrated solely on postsecondary planning (e.g.,

Kirby et al., 2019), these were included. Sixth, studies had to feature participants belonging to at least one of the following groups: autistic students (prospective college students still in high school, currently enrolled college students, college graduates, or recent college attendees); parents of autistic individuals (who were incoming college students or current college students); college personnel (such as faculty or disabilities staff); or neurotypical peers in college (e.g., Brosnan & Mills, 2016). Studies not directly involving autistic college students as participants had to center on those other groups' perceptions or connections to autistic college students.

Additionally, it is worth noting that, for a few studies that compared the experiences and autistic traits of autistic college students and their neurotypical peers, I retained these, so long as findings were clearly disaggregated and that there were multiple participants per group (e.g., Tops, 2018). I decided to exclude pieces like Gurbuz et al. (2018), however, due to the low sample of autistic students compared to neurotypical students.

### ***Exclusion Criteria***

I eliminated articles from analysis if they met any of the following eight factors. The first four factors are related to studies' content, whereas the latter four are more directly related to studies' design.

**Content Criteria.** First, articles could not center on autistic traits or questionnaires without involving any autistic college students. Second, in an effort to avoid conflating autistic' students' experiences with peers who have other disabilities that may have some similar traits, such as the repetitive behaviors found across both autistic individuals and those who have ADHD (e.g., Taylor et al., 2015), I excluded pieces like Bolourian et al. (2018), which examined patterns across neurotypes. I also excluded these studies due to the *possibility* that authors may fail to disaggregate findings across both disabled student populations. However, studies



comparing autistic students with neurotypical students more broadly (and not mentioning other disabilities) were included due to their clarity in illustrating distinctions across these populations (e.g., Lei et al., 2020a). Third, I excluded review articles that summarize the literature (e.g., Highlen, 2016) and serve as systematic reviews (e.g., Anderson et al., 2017). While these pieces are undoubtedly informative, hence the rationale behind this particular study, I did not want to present individual articles that were based on aggregating many studies. This was explicitly determined to avoid false distortion or misrepresentation of the individual pieces within review articles. Fourth, I excluded articles that provided tips and resources, yet without empirical evidence (e.g., Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2012).

**Design Criteria.** First, should samples have only included autistic high school students and centered on *predicted* postsecondary outcomes, they were also removed (e.g., Nasamran et al., 2017). Second, case studies not including people were omitted for not offering any tangible insights into autistic students' actual experiences (e.g., Mynatt et al., 2014). Third, I barred studies that included just one autistic student subject (e.g., Sayman, 2015); although these pieces can lend insight on particular experiences, as in the case of many qualitative studies, I determined that such studies would not yield as much breadth. Fourth, if studies served as evaluations of programs, but did not demonstrate explicit methods, they were also excluded.

### **Analysis of the Literature**

To ensure the rigor of the systematic review, I implemented many techniques. Per Denyer and Tranfield (2008), I aimed to ensure that this systematic review would meet four standards: transparency (maintaining precision and clarity in presenting the employed methods); inclusivity (possessing articles that build upon the knowledge of the topic); explanatory (synthesizing studies); and heuristic (working toward developing ideas of solutions to problems). These

standards shaped all aspects of the process, from utilizing a review protocol (Gough et al., 2017), to detailing the rationale behind inclusion and exclusion criteria (Denyer & Tranfield, 2008).

Akin to Lightfoot et al. (2018), who conducted a scoping review of learning disabilities studies in postsecondary education, I developed an extraction table to capture specific information about each of the studies in my review. In particular, I used Microsoft Excel to input data.

During my first round of reviewing the data I extracted, I determined that descriptive coding would be most apropos, for it would help in developing a summary of the collective content (Saldaña, 2016). Given the wealth of material extricated from each of the individual studies across 25 columns in my extraction table, I recognized the necessity of theming the data, particularly regarding topical areas of studies. I organized articles, and themes within individual pieces, via code mapping. This process allowed me to categorize codes and articles based on their similar relationships. For example, I curated all of the articles that centered on bullying and determined parallels and distinctions across them.

During my second round of coding, I utilized pattern coding, as this works to “pull together a lot of material from first cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 236). For example, I recognized similarities in “group work” and “social strategies” as both harkening back to students’ classroom experiences, and situated these categories, and other related topics, into the sub-theme of “academia.” Next, I identified “academics” as just one aspect of how students experience college. Consequently, the three main themes of the study began to surface based on students’ timelines: entering college, experiencing college, and exiting college. While there are varying degrees of content exhibited across all three themes, and similarly across the many sub-themes and categories, this structure reflected the

many stages of postsecondary education and inherent complexity associated with each stage of the college-going process.

As I reviewed the literature, I paid particular attention to how researchers planned and executed their methodological aspects, as well as described any potential limitations that researchers experienced. Within the aforementioned Excel document, I noted a variety of limitations, including both the weaknesses that the authors listed and my interpretations of unstated limitations. Upon coding all of the articles, I gathered all of the methods-related notes and determined some primary flaws.

### **Synthesis and Critiques of the Reviewed Literature**

This literature review is divided into three sections to reflect the three phases in which autistic students go through college: entrance, the main experience, and exit. Due to the majority of literature concentrated in the college experience stage, this encompasses the most robust section of this review.

#### ***Entering College***

Autistic students face a number of new experiences upon enrolling in, and first taking courses at, college. For students who had long anticipated attending college, they may partake in transition planning with their high schools. Other students may participate in formal transition programs, whether held before or during entrance into college. One issue that most autistic students share in common is reconciling their disability and determining if they seek services. Furthermore, they may reflect on their identities in new ways upon having greater agency in shaping their college experience. These experiences shape their college entrance.

**Transition Planning.** As autistic secondary school students, their parents, and school staff discuss college transition planning, several main issues surface. For one, all parties must be

in alignment and aware of the goals. Case in point, in a study by Bell et al. (2017), Irish students noted they possessed easier transitions if they not only had positive relationships with college support staff, but also if their secondary schools knew about possible transition pathways. While students who listed college attendance as a primary goal in their transition plans possessed a higher likelihood of actually attending, there still remain major disparities between expectations and enrollment (Wei et al., 2016).

Engaging in transition planning appears effective in supporting students' cognitive functioning skills, conversation abilities, and self-care skills, particularly important for the more than half of students in a National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NTLS-2) study who reported having much difficulty or no ability to communicate (Wei et al., 2016). Addressing these skills in the home is similarly vital; after all, parents remain key figures in developing students' transition plans (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Key steps include touring residential options, visiting campus, and meeting with a disability services office (DSO) counselor, all before starting college (Dymond et al., 2017). College visit days, in particular, have been noted as helpful in students learning about courses, talking with staff, checking out housing, and perhaps considering other institutional options if necessary (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014). One outlet to orient college-bound students, even if resisted by some (e.g., Van Hees et al., 2018), is their engagement in summer transition programs.

**College Autism Transition Programs.** Throughout the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, college transition programs for autistic students are emerging (e.g., Ames et al., 2016; Hotez et al., 2018; Lei et al., 2020b). In a study of 30 public U.S. institutions, Barnhill (2016) identified that seven institutions possessed autism summer transition programs. These programs, whether lasting over the course of one week (Retherford & Schreiber, 2015) or

a year or longer (Ames et al., 2016), often work to orient students with the academic, life, and social experiences and skills they need in becoming independent adults. Programmatic features varied across institutions, though many programs utilize mentors, often in the form of other students (e.g., Ames et al., 2016; Hotez et al., 2018), who are effective in building social connections through engaging autistic students in events and discussing college stressors.

Autistic students recognize their differences in interacting with other individuals, but also aim to work on their social skills (e.g., Ames et al., 2016; Anderson, 2018; Briel & Getzel, 2014), making college autism transition programs valuable spaces for offering social skills instruction and workshops, highly prioritized in program development (Barnhill, 2016). These types of courses, especially in tandem with workshops centered on other life skills, can be useful in cultivating confidence and independence (Retherford & Schreiber, 2015). When working with coaches, or mentors, students may also feel more accountable for their actions (Siew et al., 2017).

In one program, autistic students who demonstrated low levels of social engagement were encouraged to engage in community-based social activities (Ashbaugh et al., 2017). Each student possessed a peer mentor to turn to for guidance. Over the semester, students more frequently engaged in activities (e.g., student organization meeting, dining out, dorm event), with one student participating in seven during the semester. Generally, students exhibited higher satisfaction with their social experiences, though one student experienced panic attacks, which inhibited her engagement in social situations (Ashbaugh et al., 2017).

Programs especially catered to autistic students' social needs are viable in helping them make new friends and navigate social situations (Hillier et al., 2018), attain social skills (Hotez et al., 2018; Siew et al., 2017), and discuss topics like dating and romantic relationships (Ames et

al., 2016). Nevertheless, some autistic students dismissively view programs that emphasize social skills (e.g., Knott & Taylor, 2014). This appears to be an opportunity for programs and disability service offices to more actively find out from students what they seek from programs as it pertains to gaining, or at least enhancing, their social skills, as well as helping them meet peers who possess similar passions.

Many students find value in transition program participation. For instance, more than two-thirds (16/23) of autistic students enrolled in the week-long College Compass, geared for students with disabilities more generally, viewed participation as a preferred support service (Accardo et al., 2019b). Likewise, almost all autistic Summer Transition Program participants (9/10) discussed having attained general skills and knowledge that helped them in college (Hotez et al., 2018). Scheef et al. (2019) noted how an Idaho college autism program afforded autistic students attaining greater self-advocacy, focus (through meeting with program staff), and a physical environment where they could study and meet autistic peers. Since many autistic students experience concerns upon starting college, such as changes in routines (Lei et al., 2020b), transition programming can help address and potentially alleviate areas of anxiety. One Camp Campus participant noted the following (Retherford & Schreiber, 2015, pp. 382-383),

It's a helpful time of getting to know and learning from others who've been through your struggles, hearing the advice of people who've made significant progress in their weakest areas, having a positive and encouraging experience that will help prepare you for the rest of your life, and enjoying a variety of extremely fun activities!

For all of the good that transition programs afford to students, our understandings of their long-term impacts remain limited. This is due in part to several reasons, including programs' infancy (Ames et al., 2016), and thus an inability to follow students long enough to track their

persistence and graduation rates, as well as lacking control or comparison groups (Hotez et al., 2018). Additionally, program participation remains restricted to students who possess access based on parental involvement, and, presumably, can afford the costs of these offerings should there be fees involved. As financial aspects of programs are generally not found in the literature (for exceptions, see Barnhill, 2016), along with authors often not explicitly sharing possible self-serving biases about how they portrayed the programs they coordinated, our insights remain more limited. More thorough and self-reflective studies may further elucidate the lasting impacts of programs and the personnel who facilitate them.

**Disclosure.** Once arriving in postsecondary education, autistic students must face the music and decide if they would like to disclose their disabilities and access accommodations (e.g., Bell et al., 2017; Cai & Richdale, 2016; Frost et al., 2019). *Who* students disclose to also remains tricky. Studies have shown that students tend to prefer disclosing to disability service coordinators and staff members more often than their peers (e.g., Cox et al., 2017; Gelbar et al., 2015), often due to experiencing anxiety and discomfort (Madriaga & Goodley, 2010). As illustrated later, fear can similarly paralyze students from disclosing to peers.

Timing of disclosure also varies with each individual's circumstance. One-quarter of autistic students (12/48) had delayed disclosing to disability services, with five saying they wanted to handle university independently first (Anderson et al., 2018). Disabilities services office staff members have noted that often only once autistic students face hard situations do they end up disclosing (Fleischer, 2012b). Students who delayed disclosure rated having reduced satisfaction with their university experiences and also lower utilization of academic and non-academic supports (Anderson et al., 2018). This finding appears to reinforce the necessity of disclosing, as most students in a study by Casement et al. (2017) reported disclosure as a positive

act, but experienced fear, particularly because they did not want their peers to have false understandings of autism (Casement et al., 2017).

**Bullying and Stigmatization.** “I really wanted to go to university to sort of get away and start anew,” noted one student in a study by MacLeod et al. (2018, p. 686); other students have expressed similar sentiments. Fears of being stigmatized, judged, discriminated against, and being labeled often inhibited students from disclosing (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Frost et al., 2019). Students shared that labels can produce barriers in how they are viewed by others as different, and sometimes in a negative light, as one student described it as possessing a “de-humanising effect” (MacLeod et al., 2018, p. 690). Labels may be harmful, especially if they relay incorrect characterizations, such as autistic students being branded with an intellectual disability (Casement et al., 2017). Students have also experienced unease in disclosing because of aiming to conceal their autism and present themselves as neurotypical, as Cox et al. (2017) discovered “a recognizable tension between their public efforts to pass themselves off as normal and their private efforts to embrace autism as part of their unique identities” (p. 81).

Students’ fears of stigmatization may be particularly salient if they previously had negative experiences based on their autistic identities, such as bullying (e.g., DeNigris et al., 2018; Fleischer, 2012a; S. Jackson et al., 2018; Van Hees et al., 2015). Bullying appeared prominently in many studies (Casement et al., 2017; DeNigris et al., 2018; Fleischer, 2012a; S. Jackson et al., 2018), though it is noted as being lower in college than prior schooling (DeNigris et al., 2018). Fleischer (2012a) noted all three participants had been bullied. One-third of autistic student participants in a study by S. Jackson et al. (2018) had reported being bullied, often in the form of exclusion and verbal harassment. While Van Hees et al. (2018) did not indicate a direct link between bullied and not disclosing disabilities, they noted that students “perceived the move



to college as an opportunity to shed their disliked identities and to construct a new social identity, conforming to the expectations of adulthood” (p. 3301). In a study by Anderson et al. (2018), female students vocalized being more concerned with bullying than their male counterparts; this gender gap, particularly due to the lower likelihood of female students being diagnosed in the first place, must be further interrogated to understand how they make sense of stigmatization differently.

DeNigris et al. (2018) conducted a landmark study on autistic college students’ bullying experiences. Four students noted how they had been bullied in college, even if less severe than past years. Chronic bullying had significant impacts on them, albeit in surprising ways. In particular, bullied autistic students had both higher self-concepts of themselves and greater self-acceptance over time. Many students demonstrated cognitive empathy for their bullies, considering them likely insecure; others sensed they were targeted due to having a disability or being different from others. Among the strategies they recommended for dealing with bullies included seeking help, avoiding bullies, or retaliating, though this last approach was found to be unproductive. Such perspective-taking is especially interesting considering this characteristic often does not come naturally for autistic individuals (Quill, 2000). Though autistic students may have had harsh experiences in their previous schooling, autistic students generally demonstrated more positive self-concepts about themselves (DeNigris et al., 2018). Thankfully, in college, students generally reported a reduction in bullying, often limited to occasional verbal remarks and odd looks (DeNigris et al., 2018). Yet this cannot be dismissed, as such disability discrimination is prevalent and includes hearing deficit-based language used about them (Gelbar et al., 2015).

Students may also feel inhibited from disclosing to their employers, as Briel and Getzel (2014) shared how that even though all 14 participants had been registered with disability services and a majority used classroom accommodations, only one participant had disclosed being autistic on the job. That said, most students had wanted to learn about creating a disclosure plan for employers (Briel & Getzel, 2014). Once again, we see a gap between wanting assistance and actually requesting it, often at the juncture of another transition when fears of stigmatization may reduce help-seeking behaviors.

Ultimately, disclosing autism diagnoses remains an individual choice. As Frost et al. (2019) found, 15/20 students had rarely disclosed being autistic to other individuals, and often only to people they felt close to. However, many students shared that individuals did not interact with them differently upon disclosure. For the few students who had negative experiences, this context led them to refrain from disclosing to others. "Both decisions to disclose and to refrain from disclosing the diagnosis were often couched in the desire to avoid judgment and misunderstanding from others" (Frost et al., 2019, p. 5).

**Navigating Disability Services.** Every autistic student approaches utilizing the college's DSO differently, if at all, as previously demonstrated, making it impossible to pinpoint a typical pathway. However, a number of studies addressed challenges that autistic students faced in reconciling their identities as disabled individuals. For instance, some students wanted to take on new identities upon starting college (Van Hees et al., 2018) or did not want to learn more about their disability (Briel & Getzel, 2014). Examining some common trends that have emerged across studies provides context on the decisions that autistic college students – and sometimes their parents, in tandem – make in working with disability services.

We must first understand the generally low rates of autistic students registering with the DSO. Because of underreporting of autism to DSOs, colleges cannot accurately report how many autistic students are enrolled on their campuses; they must instead relay estimates based on students who are registered.

Studies illustrate varying rates of registration among students, both by institutional type and individual institution. Brown (2017) identified higher rates of documentation of being registered with DSOs among students at 2-year public institutions than other postsecondary education institutions, as well as higher numbers at 4-year public institutions than their private counterparts. High rates of disclosure at 2-year colleges have been similar echoed by Roux et al. (2015), who found approximately half of autistic students disclosing to their DSOs. Barnhill (2016) noted how, among the 30 institutions that participated in her study, autistic individuals accounted for anywhere from one to 18 percent of all registered disabled students. Half of institutions indicated they had at least 30 autistic students. One institution, for instance, with an enrollment size of at least 10,000 students, reported at least 100 autistic students on their campus registered with disability services (Barnhill, 2016). Meanwhile, a United Kingdom survey of 84 institutions found nearly 4,700 students declaring an autism diagnosis during the 2014-15 academic year (Chown et al., 2018). In a study conducted nearly a decade earlier, Smith (2007) discovered that a mere three of 29 institutions surveyed had more than 10 autistic students registered with disability services.

Despite low rates of students registering with disabilities offices at some institutions, some studies illustrate quite a range. Case in point, Sarrett (2018) found that 65% of autistic student participants had registered with their institution's DSO. Although this pool might have very well included a higher proportion of self-advocates who were perhaps more likely to

disclose to disability services, on the other hand, in Cai and Richdale's (2016) study of autistic students, only one of 23 participants had disclosed to disability services upon initial enrollment. This gap perfectly illustrates the disparity, and consequently the confusion, in truly knowing how many students register. Whether studies survey autistic students themselves or DSOs, the figures remain unclear in correctly assessing the landscape of both numbers of students registered with disability services and enrolled on campus more generally.

**Accommodations and Support Services.** Should students register with disability services, they have access to a variety of accommodations and support services. To what extent these offerings actually suit their needs, however, varies with each institution and student. The following subsections exemplify the most common tools available, the services that autistic students seek, and the challenges that students experience in obtaining useful services.

**Common Accommodations.** Though disability service offices provide a variety of accommodations to students, including tutoring and extended submission deadlines (Chown et al., 2018), many studies demonstrated the frequency of extended test time as the most commonly offered, if not unsuitable, accommodation (e.g., Accardo et al., 2019b; Barnhill, 2016; Brown & Coomes, 2016; Roux et al., 2015; Sarrett, 2018). While at times students deemed extended test time as helpful (Accardo et al., 2019b), their perceived helpfulness of this accommodation varies (Madriaga & Goodley, 2010). Even more, students who are allowed to take tests in separate spaces, also typically provided (Brown & Coomes, 2016), expressed frustration over taking make-up exams and waiting longer for grades to be submitted (Accardo et al., 2019b), as well as feeling segregated (Madriaga & Goodley, 2010). This undermines the notion of separate but equal, particularly for students who may find this accommodation emblematic of the false notion that what works for disabled students more generally will also apply to them.

Reasonable accommodations, often with an academic focus, are pervasive across institutions (Brown, 2017). Students often do not prefer typical options like note takers, audio-recorded lectures, and reader-scribes (Accardo et al., 2019b). On the support services front, students generally most gravitate toward options like academic advising and counseling/psychological services (S. Jackson et al., 2018). Few institutions, however, attend to students' social and sensory differences; in fact, only 44.7% of colleges' DSOs provided sensory accommodations (Brown, 2017).

***Mentoring, Support, and Social Groups.*** Peer mentoring programs are commonly offered in DSOs, as Brown (2017) found that nearly half of 469 colleges surveyed offered them, though only some were catered to autistic students. That said, institutions with these programs were more than three times more likely to offer services to specifically support autistic students than those without programs (Brown, 2017). Within the 2-year college context, Brown and Coomes (2016) identified that one-third of colleges surveyed featured peer mentoring programs. Sometimes these programs exist in the form of social groups that gather autistic students for various outings and activities (Cullen, 2015; Vincent et al., 2017).

Individual peer mentorships between autistic students and neurotypical mentors can be fruitful for many reasons. For instance, Ness (2013), in examining the experiences of three students, generally saw improved G.P.A. among three students who met with their mentors on a weekly basis and accessed external services. Additionally, mentors discussed techniques for enhancing organizational and study skills. Roberts and Birmingham (2017) similarly found that, over time, autistic students felt more comfortable and open with their mentors, who had proved themselves as reliable, informal, and friendly support systems. Mentors adopted a mentee-centered approach and viewed each student as an individual person, thus making for more

personalized and targeted sessions (Roberts & Birmingham, 2017). Effective mentorships can allow for deep topics to surface that do not necessarily fall under the academics umbrella, including relationships and sexual health (Ames et al., 2016). These experiences are not just rewarding for mentees, but also for the mentors in their own personal and professional development (Hamilton et al., 2016; Hotez et al., 2018). For programs that also include *autistic* mentors (Hotez et al., 2018), these spaces allow mentors to reflect on their own lives and work toward more effectively observing and understanding other autistic students' needs.

Social skills courses and groups also exist as an option within some DSOs; of the 30 institutions Barnhill (2016) analyzed, half possessed those specifically designed for autistic students. These programs can be very promising. For example, the Curtin Specialized Mentoring Program helped students across several domains: being coached on enhancing social skills; feeling more motivated to accomplish their social goals through being accountable to their mentors; receiving practical supports (e.g., organizing time, learning about the university and its resources, and solving life issues); and having group supports and emotional supports (Siew et al., 2017). While students appreciated being in the program, they noted seeking more variation in activities and social opportunities (Siew et al., 2017).

Even with high proportions of autistic students who disclose to disability services, institutions may face the issue of students resisting participation in support programs (Accardo et al., 2019b; Barnhill, 2016; Van Hees et al., 2018). Accardo et al. (2019b) reported only 26% of autistic students in their study of 23 participants belonged to a program. One student found program content to be “cheesy” and not useful for their particular needs (Accardo et al., 2019b, p. 7). Counterintuitively, autistic students tend to seek social groups and social skills supports

when they are not offered in college programs (Briel & Getzel, 2014; S. Jackson et al., 2018; Sarrett, 2018).

Sometimes, however, support programs appear to be extremely effective, as one institution boasted a first-to-second year retention rate of 90%, higher than the institution's student retention rate more generally (Barnhill, 2016). In total, we see a major inconsistency among autistic students, in that while tailored programmatic options may exist and exhibit high retention rates, as Barnhill (2016) showed, students own inhibitions' draw them away from programmatic engagement. These reasons may include experiencing anxiety or feeling like the services will not meet their expectations. Colleges will continue to reconcile this gap with continued influxes of autistic students.

*Disconcerting Trends in Disability Services.* Many concerning issues abound in disability services settings. For one, autistic students feel that many disability services staff members simply do not know enough about autism and possess limited resources to support them (Cai & Richdale, 2016). This reinforces a disconnect, not only between these neurodiverse students and neurotypical staff, but also between those who are being served by professionals. Similarly, 29% of students in a study by Gelbar et al. (2015) voiced discontent with disability service coordinators. Unfortunately, no contextual reasons are listed, shedding limited insights into how disability services staff can upend unhelpful practices.

In addition to feeling dissatisfied with disability personnel, students have expressed that accommodations fail to reflect their needs. Sarrett (2018) noted that one-third of autistic students were dissatisfied with accommodations, particularly in not addressing sensory, social, or psychiatric issues. Parents, too, have shared their discontent with faculty lacking familiarity with their children's strengths and weaknesses (Morrison et al., 2013), and DSOs similarly do not

offer particular accommodations to meet their children's needs (Anderson & Butt, 2017). Other issues are abundant, from staff inconsistently implementing accommodations (Sarrett, 2018) and faculty failing to fulfill accommodations requests (Sarrett, 2018), to students needing to prove their disabilities due to campus members questioning their disability (Zeedyk et al., 2018). The onus should ultimately never fall on autistic students, nor their parents, in obtaining tools that may enhance the students' postsecondary education experiences.

*Students' Desires of Accommodations and Services.* Studies have also identified what students most seek out of accommodations and support services, especially informative in giving institutions firsthand perspectives of what will best enhance their postsecondary education experiences. In general, students felt that their campuses would be more favorable places if they possessed more visible autism awareness efforts and trainings (Dymond et al., 2017; Sarrett, 2018). Unfortunately, workshops are rarely offered (for exceptions, see Hotez et al., 2018). Other recommendations included having more sensory-friendly spaces free of overstimulation (Sarrett, 2018) and improving psychosocial supports (Van Hees et al., 2015). Students expressed that disability service staff members should adopt more personalized approaches with them (Accardo et al., 2019b; Dymond et al., 2017).

Both students and parents also shared that there should be one primary coordinator or contact person should serve as a go-to individual when students need support (Dymond et al., 2017; Morrison et al., 2013). Among the more unique suggestions that students suggested faculty should implement include the following: sharing office hours upon course registration (Accardo et al., 2019b); being willing to meet with them to address potential accommodations (Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2012); and more saliently utilizing classroom technology and interactivity (Madriaga & Goodley, 2010),



Some institutions also recognize the need for improvements in how they provide services to students. A few studies have noted how various campus units, stakeholders, and community groups must work together to better serve autistic students (Austin & Peña, 2017; Barnhill, 2016). Faculty members, too, must break down barriers so students feel they can ask for help. “Perhaps at the heart of a productive pedagogy is the sense of destabilising and, maybe demolishing, power relationships between learner and teachers” (Madriaga & Goodley, 2010, p. 121).

Costs. While accommodations and support services should inherently not come at a cost to students, as these tools offer more accessible mechanisms for processing content, this is not always the case. Brown (2017) discovered that 2.2% of institutions surveyed provided autism-specific services for an extra fee. Meanwhile, Barnhill (2016) found that 66.3% of institutions charged for supports, ranging from \$1,050 - \$17,400 per year beyond typical tuition and room and board. On average, among institutions that charged students, fees came to more than \$6,500 every year (Barnhill, 2016). These practices not only reduce access to services, but also underpin a sad and true trend: autistic students often lack the same opportunities to feel safe, welcomed, and comfortable on campus as their neurotypical peers.

### ***Experiencing College***

This section highlights four core areas to autistic students’ lives while enrolled in college. First, autistic students’ defining characteristics in how they make sense of their learning, skills, and struggles, particularly regarding how these factors manifest in college contexts. Second, academics is examined from the perspectives of autistic students themselves, faculty members, and neurotypical peers. Third, non-academic aspects of students’ community, ranging from social situations to parental support, are explored. Fourth, co-occurrence with other disabilities

and mental health issues that undergird additional aspects of students' lives are recognized, in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of the psychological matters that affect many individuals.

**Defining Autism Characteristics.** Though autism may be viewed in a deficit light in some studies (e.g., Dymond et al., 2017; Morrison et al., 2013; Zeedyk et al., 2018), autistic individuals possess some distinct strengths and notable challenges that can be addressed with proper supports. This section addresses both the strengths that mark students' experiences and also the inherent challenges associated with how postsecondary education institutions are not designed to meet autistic students' needs. Multiple domains serve as both roadblocks and prospects for positive change: 1) specialized interests; 2) self-advocacy and self-efficacy; 3) executive functioning; and 4) hypersensitivity.

**Specialized Interests.** Autistic students are well positioned to leverage their strengths and passions into their academics. As content experts in often very specific and niche subjects, autistic students may be more apt in being focused and engaging in effective reading and writing skills (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Gurbuz et al., 2019). "Participants tended to spend a great deal of time reading around their interest subjects which often led to a realisation that they were far more knowledgeable of the subject compared to their non-AS peers, reflected in their good assessment grades" (Casement, 2019, p. 81). Such specialized interests may also prompt students to identify particular majors; one participant in a study by Briel and Getzel (2014), for example, choose to pursue broadcast journalism based on having a passion for mass media. Following interests can provide students with a sense of direction that positively shape their lives (Wiorkowski, 2015). Ward and Webster (2018) found that students were excited to follow degrees that "would ultimately lead them into a career that would allow them to pursue their

passions and interests” (p. 8). Perhaps the only negative is that when these extreme interests serve as distractions from other priorities (Fleischer, 2012).

*Self-Advocacy and Self-Efficacy.* Autistic students’ tendency to lack self-advocacy skills is a major concern for parents and college personnel (Dymond et al., 2017), particularly since college often corresponds with entering adulthood and having to handle more tasks independently. Consequently, many college autism transition programs prioritize self-advocacy in their curriculum (e.g., Barnhill, 2016; Hotez et al., 2018; White et al., 2016). Providing students with the skillsets to be more adept in independently handling tasks and situations is necessary, especially for students who may have self-favorable impressions of their actual capabilities. Case in point, 80% of participants in a study by Gelbar et al. (2015) were comfortable in advocating for themselves, yet the authors similarly noted that only half of the sample noted being comfortable in disclosing their diagnoses, thus demonstrating self-advocacy as a complicated and nuanced issue.

Transition and mentorship programs also represent prime avenues for talking about advocacy issues. Hotez et al. (2018) found that most students, before participating in the first iteration of a summer transition program, could not describe what self-advocacy meant; after the course, however, all nine students defined self-advocacy as standing up for themselves. Also notable, following participation, student “responses reflected a greater level of understanding of the complexities underlying disclosure” (p. 10). Meanwhile, in the Autism Mentorship Initiative, over time, mentees took a more active role in their relationship with mentors by indicating to them their particular objectives (Roberts & Birmingham, 2017). Since self-advocacy is often not explicitly taught, unless in these more programmatic contexts, that self-advocacy training exists remains vital.

***Executive Functioning.*** Cullen (2015) identified that autistic students' primary needs often fell under the umbrella of daily living skills, such as navigating public transportation and prioritizing tasks. One common type of "deficit" noted by autistic individuals included executive functioning skills (Dymond et al., 2017, p. 816). Executive functioning skills represent a main theme noted in studies (e.g., Dymond et al., 2017; Hillier et al., 2018; McKeon et al., 2013; Scheef et al., 2019).

Hillier et al. (2018) emphasized how that, no matter students' academic capabilities, these executive functioning challenges can set them back on accomplishing tasks. As one faculty member indicated, students "could not always comprehend what was assigned for that day's class despite multiple repetitions and the instructions being plainly listed online and in the syllabus" (McKeon et al., 2013, p. 356). Executive functioning difficulties can eventually compromise students' academic performance, even if they are intellectually capable. Shmulsky et al. (2017) determined that students who had elevated executive functioning scores on the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function – Adult Version (BRIEF – A) test, meaning they faced greater challenges with executive functioning, had significantly lower G.P.A. compared to those without the same degree of executive functioning challenges.

One component of executive functioning is how some autistic individuals are rigid in how they approach their daily tasks, in that they seek routine and engage in repetitive behaviors and tasks (Adreon & Durocher, 2007, Lamport & Turner, 2014; Taylor & Colvin, 2013). One primary theme in a study by Fleischer (2012a) was the notion of "studies versus everyday routine" (p. 187), as autistic students struggled with planning daily activities; thus, students sometimes ceased making steady progress in their academics because of contending with tasks like finances, eating, and cleaning. Nearly 87% of students in a study by Van Hees et al. (2015)

noted that they search for structure and routine in their lives, as unexpected changes can result in feeling scattered and confused.

Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) recognized the prominence of students seeking greater routine, particularly in how courses are structured, so they can anticipate forthcoming tasks and assignments. Routines can serve students well, as the authors followed up with a study on teaching STEM students, finding that instructors had more participatory and less anxious students when instituting clear structure in their courses (Gobbo et al., 2018). Experiencing difficulties in organization was also evident amongst autistic students in a study by Jansen et al. (2017), as 61.9% noted this as a problem. As a result, the authors noted effective reasonable accommodations as entailing students obtaining support from counselors and having exam deferrals. Jansen et al. (2017) also recommended instructors allow students to take exams in smaller groups. Instructors implementing more proactive measures in reducing potential barriers appear to be key. Additionally, providing students with tools to help them cope with unexpected changes to routines (McKeon et al., 2013), as well as utilizing schedules (Van Hees et al., 2015), may be useful.

***Hypersensitivity.*** Whether in the form of distracting sounds, smells, sights, or other types of stimulation, hypersensitivity impacts autistic students in their courses, studying, and other campus experiences (e.g., Anderson et al., 2018; Colclough, 2018; Gurbuz et al., 2019; Van Hees et al., 2015). Such sensory overload can be exhausting and taxing. As one student described in a study by Van Hees et al. (2015), his “brain functions as if it were a computer network” (p. 1680), as each computer is concentrated on a different task or distraction. This may cause deep frustration, especially in distinguishing between important and trivial matters (Van Hees et al.,

2015), another illustration of how autistic individuals may struggle to look at the whole picture when centered on smaller details.

Noise, for instance, is pervasive in all parts of society, including academia.

Hypersensitivity prevents autistic students from staying centered on their tasks (e.g., Anderson, 2018; Cai & Richdale, 2016; Lizotte, 2018; Thompson et al., 2019) and is likely to manifest in large classrooms with many overwhelming and distracting stimuli, like multiple simultaneous conversations. Some students implement strategies to lessen this external stimulus (e.g., instituting coping devices), though these techniques can cause the appearance of being distant (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Other students, like a participant in Lizotte's (2018) study, directly asked peers to talk more softly. Hypersensitivity leads some students to request accommodations, such as taking tests in spaces free of distractions (Sarrett, 2018). Additionally, noise hypersensitivity accounts for a primary reason why students avoid social engagements (Colclough, 2018). Noise hypersensitivity indeed extends across many campus contexts.

**Academics.** Taking courses, which can present an assortment of opportunities and struggles, is a core component of students' experiences. Though courses represent outlets for students to recognize their personal learning preferences and determine what learning styles most resonate with them, they may simultaneously experience academic setbacks (Wiorkowski, 2015). These snags can hamper their momentum in progressing through courses and obtaining credentials. Among these challenges are distractions (Thompson et al., 2019), social awkwardness (Lizotte, 2018), anxiety in interacting with peers (Alverson et al., 2019), and not always feeling comfortable in asking questions in class (Anderson et al., 2018), thus prompting frustration in not knowing *when* to participate (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Needless to say, stressors are prominent, and lead students to avoid them however possible, such as taking reduced course

loads (Anderson et al., 2018; Van Hees et al., 2015). Learning more about students' in-class experiences, especially in relation to how faculty and peers perceive them, afford a greater essence of the academic aspects of college life.

***Students' Interests and Passions.*** Many scholars describe autistic individuals as exhibiting obsessiveness about a specific and limited range of topics, often about how particular systems function (e.g., meteorology, astronomy; Baron-Cohen et al., 2005; Wehman et al., 2009). Faculty noted how autistic students who possess a high level of curiosity and content knowledge about the topic at hand may have greater confidence and feel more greatly invested in attaining research and writing skills (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). In the same vein, students who shared their disciplinary expertise with peers can help them serve as “credible authorities and engaging others” (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014, p. 18). When these autistic students are in fields of study where their passionate interests are valued, as opposed to defeated for being viewed as obsessions, they may be more likely to select majors and engage in courses (Briel & Getzel, 2014; Gobbo et al., 2018; Ward & Webster, 2018).

Often special interests tend to represent arenas in which students felt safer, less stressed, and happier (Fleischer, 2012a), all the more important for a student population who may find having a combination of anxiety and overstimulation to be defeating. Students' parents have identified that these interests could also translate to pursuing particular professions, such as one mom who indicated that her son's love for animals could represent a career pathway (Kirby et al., 2019). Discovering new interests and fields, too, per what college affords, may also lead autistic students down new career routes (Wiorkowski, 2015). Few studies explicitly center on autistic students' interests, and researchers must work to empower autistic students through highlighting their passions and skillsets.

Students also tend to leverage their interests outside of class by utilizing campus libraries (Anderson, 2018), student organizations (Lei et al., 2020b), and social media (Cullen, 2015) as spaces to meet peers who have specific passions. Understandably, autistic students find it easier to make friends in college with those who possess shared interests (Van Hees et al., 2015; 2018). The challenge emerges when students prioritize engaging in special interests over addressing academic matters (Fleischer, 2012a), making it all the more important for faculty to recognize their interests and strengths and find ways to capitalize on them.

**Group Work.** Handling social dynamics does not come easily or naturally to autistic students, making mandatory engagement in group work harmful to both their academic success and emotional well-being. Group work only heightens the stress and anxiety that students experience in navigating social dynamics while simultaneously completing academic work; therefore, these activities represent an ongoing challenge, both for them and their faculty (e.g., Cullen, 2015; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Gurbuz et al., 2019; Van Hees et al., 2015). Most autistic students who are forced to participate in groups cope with the stressors over disclosing to their group-mates, unless they share their diagnoses with the class more generally (Lizotte, 2018). One student in a study by Gurbuz et al. (2019) shared, “I feel largely the administration ignores that these issues exist and/or feel that one should just have to put up with some discomfort from time to time” (p. 625). Consequently, students aim to avoid participating in group assignments based on their social-communication difficulties and differences (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Likewise, parents have expressed their desire for instructors to allow their children to engage in alternative tasks to group work (Morrison et al., 2013).

Gobbo et al. (2018) noted how autistic students avoid engaging in group work and demonstrated anxiety in these capacities. Students also tended to want to know the “right”



answers, which can help in recalling facts. Similarly, autistic students' desire to be viewed in a favorable light led to rule-seeking behaviors. Faculty were optimistic in how they could support students' preferences by instituting consistent expectations and routines. Instructors also aimed to attend to the emotional climate by trying to anticipate student stressors. While these interpretations and tools are not unique to STEM faculty, Gobbo et al. (2018) recognized how good instruction can help students reach their best, thus transcending discipline.

Ultimately, group work is prominent in many courses. Faculty reconcile to what degree they should be considering the needs of autistic students – some of whom may prefer arbitration to their assignment to groups if they are required to participate – and also neurotypical peers who “felt disadvantaged by the inclusion” of autistic students in their groups (Knott & Taylor, 2014, p. 417). Faculty must thus balance both groups' desires. Instructors who taught at an institution specifically dedicated to serve students with disabilities said it was beneficial to socially engineer groups, in order for students to have suitable partners, and to provide options for individual course projects (Gobbo et al., 2018). Unfortunately, it appears that only faculty who have keen insights and trainings on autism may be more acutely aware of how autistic students may best thrive in courses. Offering alternative options for group assignments, such as individual or one-partner projects, may be worth instituting.

***Study Strategies.*** Three studies centered on how autistic college students employ study strategies, though demonstrate mixed results (L. Jackson et al., 2018, Reed et al., 2016; Tops et al., 2017). Both L. Jackson et al. (2018) and Reed et al. (2016) utilized a multiple baseline design to measure student progress across different points in time. L. Jackson et al. (2018) determined that three students who engaged in biweekly individual tutoring and learned about tools to

support their writing (e.g., mnemonic devices) had enhanced their writing quality in generalized assignments.

Meanwhile, Reed et al. (2016), also studying three autistic students, were interested in understanding the quality of student note-taking and determining differences in traditional versus flipped classrooms. Interventionists employed a problem-solving approach and illustrated various strategies to teach good note-taking skills, such as using abbreviations). All three students demonstrated improvements, even with minimal instruction, though the student in the flipped classroom tended to record fewer details (Reed et al., 2016).

Finally, a study examined the utility of think-aloud protocols (TAPs), as well as the Learning Attitude and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) instrument, which measures metacognitive language (Tops et al., 2018). The test leaders wanted to compare how autistic students and neurotypical students engaged in certain study techniques and arrived at solution to problems. Compared to “typically developing peers” (p. 142) who did not use TAPs, autistic students who used TAPs tended to reread material much more often, use a calculator for simple arithmetic, and paraphrase more frequently to memorize content. Students also had more difficulties in ignoring irrelevant information. Both autistic and neurotypical students exhibited similarities in the types of memory support strategies and monitoring strategies they utilized (Tops et al., 2018).

These three studies demonstrate the necessity of understanding not just the experiences of autistic students utilizing support services, but rather *how* they learn and make sense of new tools that can aid their learning. While these studies possessed small sample sizes and are more preliminary than conclusive, they suggest the utility of more individualized instruction that recognizes the differences in how students learn.

***STEM Courses.*** Many National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2) studies (e.g., Shattuck et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2017), as well as a few other pieces (e.g., Gobbo et al., 2018), have centered on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields as promising for autistic students for a number of reasons. Autistic STEM majors, who begin their postsecondary education experiences at community colleges, or solely attended these institutions, possessed higher persistence compared to their non-STEM counterparts (80.68% v. 47.39%; Wei et al., 2014). Furthermore, STEM students at 2-year colleges were twice as likely to transfer to 4-year institutions than non-STEM peers (Wei et al., 2014). These high retention and transfer rates appear encouraging, though they mask certain challenges that autistic STEM students experience. For instance, Shattuck et al. (2014) found that autistic STEM majors had lower odds of feeling like they could “handle most things that come their way” (p. 5). Racial differences are also evident, as Wei et al. (2017) find white autistic students having significantly higher odds of majoring in STEM fields. Taking advanced math courses in high school also appears to be a predictor of majoring in STEM. These quantitative studies, while helpful in providing general context, do not speak to how autistic STEM students describe their experiences.

***Faculty Perceptions.*** We cannot dismiss how faculty members’ beliefs of autistic students’ opportunities, or challenges, hold significant ramifications in their teaching practices. Two articles, in particular, solely studied faculty perceptions (Austin & Peña, 2017; Zeedyk et al., 2018). Each of these pieces elucidates how faculty can reform their instructional approaches to more inclusively teach students.

Upon interviewing faculty who were noted as being exceptional in supporting autistic students, Austin and Peña (2017) identified salient traits that defined these instructors. With

personal connections to students with disabilities, these faculty, exhibiting passion about teaching and social justice issues, demonstrated confidence in what their students could offer in their courses. Through placing high expectations of students, building rapport, and offering appropriate supports, faculty showed an ethic of care. “Faculty members believed that their students, especially those with ASD, responded more positively to their feedback and guidance once the students felt comfortable and safe” (Austin & Peña, 2017, p. 22).

Zeedyk et al. (2018), who relayed two studies in one publication, dedicated the latter study to surveying 132 faculty members’ perceptions of, and experiences in working with, autistic students. Forty-four percent had taught a self-disclosed autistic student, and 79% suspected they have had an autistic student in class. Though a majority of faculty agreed (56%) or strongly agreed (29%) about being comfortable to have autistic students in their classes, most faculty did not have syllabi statements about accommodations nor talked about these in class. This signifies a missed opportunity and an area for growth.

There are a few points worth noting that mark both of these studies. For one, they were both concentrated in a similar geographical area: southern California (Zeedyk et al., 2018) and the southwestern United States (Austin & Peña, 2017). A sizable sample of each study had personal connections to students with disabilities or autistic individuals, and demonstrated an investment in further learning about autism. Zeedyk et al. (2018) found that 88% of faculty indicated they would participate in autism trainings. While we can contend that these participants may have been more invested in and supportive of autistic students than the general population, their generally encouraging methods and perspectives yield major implications for fellow faculty who aim to enhance their own practice.

***Faculty Teaching Practices.*** Several studies illustrate encouraging teaching techniques that faculty employ to involve and welcome autistic students, and also students more generally, in their courses. Possessing familiarity with autism is key to developing appropriate techniques. Faculty understandings of autism often emerge from a variety of sources, such as having conversations with DSOs (Barnhill, 2016) or attending autism information sessions (Brown & Coomes, 2016). As illustrated, faculty may provide opportunities for students to follow their interests through pursuing course projects (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014), assuming they view those deep interests as strengths (Gobbo et al., 2018). Providing a variety of assignments (McKeon et al., 2013), as well as structured scaffolding of assignments (Austin & Peña, 2017), allow for students to gradually demonstrate their skills in different ways.

Faculty may also find ways of building upon autistic students' strengths, such as adamantly following rules, recognizing patterns, and demonstrating motivation (Gobbo et al., 2018). Collectively, these teaching techniques work to boost the positive traits through meeting students' needs, as well as hopefully reducing the likelihood of inappropriate class behaviors (Gobbo et al., 2018) and off-topic tangents (McKeon et al., 2013). Faculty must also work toward not being overconfident about their own aptness to support autistic students, as Ponomaryova et al. (2018) cautioned that instructors need not adapt their classrooms so much as they should possess a tolerant atmosphere.

***Student Interactions with Faculty.*** Through utilizing encouraging teaching tools, and demonstrating themselves as reliable and decent people, instructors are well positioned to develop meaningful bonds with students. Faculty make themselves accessible to students in numerous capacities: mentors (Colclough, 2018), individuals who share common interests (Accardo et al., 2019b); and even sources of informational support (e.g., advice) or instrumental

support (e.g., obtaining accommodations; LeGary, 2017). Students noted that when they built good relationships with faculty and support staff, especially in light of attaining accommodations, they experienced reduced stress and enhanced comfort in speaking up for themselves (Ward & Webster, 2018). The authors found that “support from instructors acted as a mediating influence that enabled students to maintain emotional stability and avoid moving into a negative internal state of anxiety and sustain a more positive one of determination and perseverance” (Ward & Webster, 2018, p. 16). Similarly, Colclough (2018) identified how students often felt fondness and admiration toward faculty who demonstrated support in students’ academic success. Faculty can even offer social support and provide recommendations for campus activities, as students in Bailey et al. (2020) noted. Ultimately, faculty demonstrating care and consideration can go a long way toward enhancing autistic students’ sense of belonging and faith in their capabilities.

*Peers.* Another group of individuals core to autistic students’ postsecondary education experiences are their peers. Though peers may feel empathy toward autistic individuals and express tolerance for inclusion, as Underhill et al. (2019) found in a study of how neurotypical students responded to a vignette involving a character with autistic traits, some peers expressed hesitation in interacting with autistic people due to potentially having to shoulder more work on a course project, for instance. While this one study involving a fictional scenario may not immediately provide reason for concern, the underlying themes speak to how autistic individuals are often seen as the “other,” a phrase echoed by Nachman and Brown (2020). A divide is often mounted between neurotypical students and their neurodiverse peers, and research that exhibits the role of peer perceptions are especially informative in illuminating possibilities for gathering frames of reference, dispelling myths, and enhancing acceptance.

Ten studies featured in this systematic review worked to exclusively capture perceptions held by neurotypical students (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2019; Matthews et al., 2015; Nevill & White, 2011; Obeid et al., 2015; Someki et al., 2018; Underhill et al., 2019; White et al., 2019). Better understanding these students' views bring to light how colleges must work to incorporate autism into more classroom discussions and dismiss myths in the process.

Autism education affords several advantages. First, when neurotypical students are made aware of autistic students' diagnoses, they demonstrated reduced negative responses and greater understanding toward their autistic peers (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Matthews et al., 2015). Second, neurotypical students who had connections with autistic individuals also viewed them more positively (Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Nevill & White, 2011). Nonetheless, holding more favorable views of autistic students does not always translate to expressing a desire of spending time with them, whether as friends (Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014) or romantic partners (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015).

Third, several studies illustrate distinctions across fields of study in how neurotypical students are comfortable with and interested in engaging with autistic students, though the nascency of scholarship examining field differences requires us to approach analyzing findings with certain caution. Gardiner and Iarocci (2014) determined that, compared to students in other disciplines, arts and social sciences students demonstrated a higher willingness of volunteering with autistic students. Meanwhile, in a study of neurotypical students' openness to spend their free time with autistic peers, those in physical sciences field indicated highest willingness to do so. Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2015) found STEM students to possess more autism stigma than counterparts in more helping-related majors. There is no conclusiveness regarding how

neurotypical students' field of study may influence to what degree they are understanding of, and want to befriend, autistic students. That said, we may suppose that neurotypical students' identification with autistic students may play a role. Nevill and White (2011) identified how engineering students were both most comfortable and fearful around autistic students, perhaps due to having similar characteristics and seeing those same traits in themselves.

Fourth, cultural distinctions of autism exist, as seen in how neurotypical students from Lebanon (Obeid et al., 2015) and Japan (Someki et al., 2018) viewed autism more negatively compared to American peers. Extending the work of Obeid et al. (2015), Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2019) recognized that ultimately while students in Lebanon had less frequency in interacting with, and possessed less knowledge of, autistic students, they exhibited greater openness to experience than their U.S. peers. The country where participants lived had little difference in autism stigma; instead, autism knowledge, openness to experience, contact with autistic people and beliefs in equality were more significant. Chansa-Kabali et al. (2019), while not included in the group of 10 studies focused solely on neurotypical peers due to having a few autistic participants, sheds lights on college students in Zambia; most had low levels of autism awareness. In fact, only 22% of participants had heard of autism before study participation. Sadly, there remains limited research on non-Western views, as illustrated in studies in the single digits capturing neurotypical perspectives, making this a fruitful space for further inquiry.

Online autism trainings, though, may be encouraging in changing false conceptions of autism (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Obeid et al., 2015; Someki et al., 2015). These studies on neurotypical peers' perceptions, in their entirety, represent a need to not only educate these students about autism and students' differences, but also eradicate stereotypes that differences in behaviors and thinking should equate to avoiding making new friendships.



**Community.** Outside of classes, a number of outlets, opportunities, and individuals encompass autistic college students' lives. A second notable sub-theme in how they experience college exists under the notion of *community*. This section highlights how autistic students experience three key factors: 1) socialization; 2) parental support and involvement; and 3) housing and residential life.

**Socialization.** Despite the prevalent stereotype that autistic individuals are antisocial, noted by scholars like Fombonne et al. (1994), autistic students demonstrate high rates of participating in extracurricular activities in high school, especially if they end up attending 2-year colleges (Roux et al., 2015), and have expressed that they want to be more involved and engaged on their campuses (Colclough, 2018). The unwritten rules of social situations notwithstanding, autistic students want to make friends (Alverson et al., 2019; Vincent et al., 2017). More than 60 percent of autistic students in a study by S. Jackson et al. (2018) reported having at least one close friend at school. Considering that only 41% of autistic individuals who completed a survey by Gelbar et al. (2015) felt they possessed the social skills to be successful in college, attaining more familiarity and comfort in this domain is pivotal.

Online and virtual contexts can serve students to socialize with others, as several studies indicated (e.g., Alverson et al., 2019; Frost et al., 2019). In their landmark study, Anderson et al. (2019) illustrated how online discussion boards for autistic individuals allow for building connection. The challenge rises, though, in how to channel the comfort that some autistic students only find in digital spaces to in-person environments.

Social organizations and clubs represent popular spaces for autistic students to interact with peers (Anderson et al., 2018; Lei et al., 2020b), though not all autistic students, nor settings, may lend themselves to productive social experiences. The lack of disability clubs on campus,

for one, was indicated by students as an area for improvement in a study by Accardo et al. (2019a). While there are limited studies attending to autistic students' campus engagement, in the form of organizations, volunteering, and other social settings, insights gleaned from structured transition programs (Lei et al., 2020b) or mentorship experiences (Ashbaugh et al., 2017; Knott & Taylor, 2014) offer a lens into what factors contribute to more fruitful socialization experiences.

Having similar interests represent useful mechanisms for autistic students to meet peers, though it is sometimes difficult to locate the right spaces for developing friendships (e.g., Casement et al., 2017; Cullen, 2015; Van Hees et al., 2015). Sometimes students rely on their friends from previous schooling as socialization outlets (Casement et al., 2017; Dymond et al., 2017). Autistic students seek having a higher quantity of close friends, as more than one-third of U.S. university students ( $n=17$ , 38.2%) identified being at least slightly dissatisfied with the number of close friends (S. Jackson et al. 2018). Most students (58.9%) said they did not have romantic relationships, and many students reported feeling isolated, left out often, and lacking companionship (S. Jackson et al., 2018).

Specific venues may also foster autistic student engagement in socialization. For instance, Anderson's (2018) study of autistic students' use of campus libraries found that they represented outlets for practicing and participating social skills. Students used libraries as spaces to find academic resources about dating, engage with peers who have similar interests (like playing the Pokémon card game), and study with classmates. True, some students alternatively viewed libraries as quiet environments to avoid interacting with peers, such as their roommates, but the study illuminates the opportunities of libraries as settings for exploring new interests, socializing with peers, and, potentially, learning more about themselves. In fact, some students

went to libraries to obtain health information about their identities, such as being autistic (Anderson, 2018).

One unexplored space for autistic students to build their social experiences is in settings with fellow autistic students, but not necessarily formal college autism transition programs. The lack of scholarship on autistic clubs and organizations is especially startling. One space that offers much promise, however, is in the form of Participatory Action Research (PAR) endeavors, such as a groundbreaking college-centered piece by Searle et al. (2019) that involved autistic project assistants, project researchers and autistic students. This specific study was centered on how autistic individuals viewed the participatory process, and the common theme was how much participants appreciated being able to connect with other autistic people.

One respondent noted that “it’s nice to meet people who can empathize with what you go through or can give advice because they experience similar things,” thus showing how participatory research has been able to provide a shared understanding and heightened feelings of trust, ensuring that participants were more likely to disclose relevant information (Searle et al., 2019, p.89).

Clearly more scholars may entertain the idea of enlisting autistic researchers to work in building connection and community with study participants, and equally so, involving autistic participants in study design and analysis.

***Parental Support and Involvement.*** The close relationships that autistic students often share with their parents can serve as a double-edged sword once they start college, as in one sense parents provide deep levels of guidance and comfort, but may unintentionally hold their children back from handling matters independently and advocating for themselves (e.g., Anderson & Butt, 2017). Reconciling this balance represents a major theme across many studies

(e.g., Alverson et al., 2019; Dallas et al., 2018, Dymond et al., 2017; Fleischer, 2012b; Peña & Kocur, 2013).

Whether setting up their children's transitions into college (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Mitchell & Beresford, 2014), or even participating in programs alongside them (Chown et al., 2018), parents seek to ensure that their children are well set up for success and comfort upon starting college. This may reach as far as parents organizing meetings with college staff members on how their children can receive campus supports, leaving students to be in more passive roles (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014). Peña and Kocur (2013) found that parents would often handle conversations on behalf of their children, setting up courses, financial aid, enrollment, and other key processes in beginning college. Parental involvement also extends to students' motivations to attend college often being more external, stemming from their parents, as opposed to internally driving them (Alverson et al., 2019).

A study by Dallas et al. (2018) identified that disability service providers (DSPs) often felt family members served as important individuals and resources for autistic individuals, but more so on the non-academic front (e.g., encouraging their children to be more independent and offering emotional support). DSPs felt that parents who were too involved in their children's academics could inhibit students' development. The authors also noted that parents should not advocate for their children, nor participate in on-campus meetings or communicate with campus offices (Dallas et al., 2018). On the other hand, should parents not be involved in their children's lives, due to distance or failure to obtain much information, this can serve as a major barrier, as Dymond et al. (2017) noted this counterpoint. As a DSP in Dallas et al. (2018) framed it, parents must walk "a fine line" in helping their children (p. 1217). Since FERPA limits parental roles, this can serve as another obstacle (Dymond et al., 2017). Alternatively, restrictions may compel

students to act with greater self-advocacy in determining how and when to offer written permission for their parents to participate in specific college matters.

The positive elements of parental involvement, particularly on the emotional support front, can be notable. One student felt that receiving validation and encouragement from his parents increased his comfort in talking about stressors with campus personnel (LeGary, 2017). “Students stressed the critical importance of the emotional support their parents provided to keep them on track during the uncertainties and challenges they faced by listening to their uncertainties and giving appropriate advice concerning their questions about transition decisions” (Van Hees et al., 2018, p. 3302). This guidance may also buffer other stressors that students experience as they begin to navigate college. Similarly, parents can be useful in helping set up summer work experiences (Briel & Getzel, 2014). The challenge emerges when students too greatly rely on and welcome their parents’ involvement, as opposed to having limits set (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014).

Parents recognize how their children may lack self-advocacy skills, by virtue of experiences associated with autism. This is precisely why parents encourage their children to obtain supports or participate in programs that provide them with consistent meetings, tools, and contact people who can provide assistance (Morrison et al., 2013). That parents worry their children will be taken advantage of by their peers (Morrison et al., 2013) and cannot cope with social dynamics (Anderson & Butt, 2017) only reinforces a deficit-based narrative, even if there may be some truth in those legitimate concerns.

Children and parents navigate similar challenges in this balance, in that the frustration and concerns are not just one-sided on the parental end (Van Hees et al., 2018). Among students’ primary concerns were similar to aforementioned studies like acquiring advocacy (and battling

levels of dependence), but there are distinctions in autistic students determining if, how and when to disclose. For instance, whereas parents encouraged utilizing disability services, students resisted and wanted to handle college on their own and not seek help, even when challenges emerged. Parents, in an effort to counteract possible difficulties their children could experience, tended to talk about their children's autism to faculty and staff on campus visit days. In this way parents felt they needed to directly advocate for their children. Disagreements on advocacy and openness about diagnoses led to "difficulties to redefine the parent-child relationship from a hierarchical relationship into a mutual adult like relationship" (Van Hees et al, 2018, p. 3300).

To reconcile how much parents should be involved, studies have recommended a number of strategies. While parents can support their children in setting up services, parents must gradually encourage their children to steer conversations with counselors and not be the primary communicators (Peña & Kocur, 2013). Similarly, pushing their children to engage in daily tasks on their own (e.g., shopping, cooking, cleaning) sets students up for being more independent in their choices and basic needs; here, transition programs like Camp Campus are key in these efforts (Retherford & Schreiber, 2015). Eventually, much of their children's success may remain contingent on to what extent parents set students up to communicate for themselves *before* college. These procedures may help students become more autonomous upon starting college.

***Housing and Residential Life.*** Studies minimally touch on how autistic students handle the demands of living on their own in residential halls or on-campus dorms, though housing also encompasses a major sphere of their campus lives. While only some autistic students live in campus housing, the demands of these living situations may be harsh. Many unique stressors may emerge, such as handling constant noises and smells (Knott & Taylor, 2014). Even more, despite being in close quarters with other students, autistic students may feel isolated and keep to

themselves (Lizotte, 2018). It is also worth noting that institutional and national norms may dictate students' opportunities to access housing; for instance, a study by Casement et al. (2017) found that all United Kingdom students lived on campus, whereas students at Spanish institutions lived at home.

Dymond et al. (2017) noted that it would be useful for autistic students to have special housing accommodations. Chown et al. (2018) recognized the popularity of residential hall preferences as a commonly utilized support for United Kingdom autistic students; this trend should become mainstream. Considering the paucity of residential halls offering single rooms, Brown (2017) identified this as an additional area for improvement. Institutions must prioritize offering autistic students different, more comfortable residential options. The tides may change very slowly if institutions continue to reactively respond to increased issues in housing.

**Co-Occurring Disabilities and Mental Health Issues.** In addition to accounting for the salient autism-related characteristics that mark their daily lives, handling academics, and engaging with other people in their communities, many autistic individuals also experience co-occurring conditions like ADHD, ADD, and other disabilities (Anderson et al., 2018; Sturm & Kasari, 2019). Leitner (2014) noted that studies have shown a co-occurrence between autism and ADHD ranging 37% to 85%. This co-occurrence is just one of many challenges that impact many autistic individuals' lives, as they experience not only the distinct traits of autism, but also potentially the characteristics – some very self-destructive – of other disabilities and mental health issues.

For the context of this dissertation, and based on the prominence in which this topic surfaced, I concentrate on the prominence of mental health issues that affect a large proportion of the population. For instance, in a study of 26 autistic college students, Gurbuz et al. (2019) found

that 14 had a mental health condition, predominantly anxiety and/or depression. As many studies illustrate, managing anxiety and/or depression alongside the challenging traits associated with autism can translate to even more exhausting college experiences (e.g., S. Jackson et al., 2018). Finally, I conclude by recognizing the emergence of information on autistic college students' loneliness, as well as suicidal thoughts and attempts.

Prior to synthesizing the preponderance of autistic college students with mental health issues, it is worth noting two recent studies that were exclusively focused on these topics. York University's Autism Mentorship Program (AMP), first covered at a more general programmatic level in Ames et al. (2016), is examined in greater detail in McMorris et al. (2019), especially as it pertains to participants' mental health conditions. The authors discovered that 56% had at least one mental health diagnosis, with anxiety and depression listed as the most common diagnoses; more than half of those students had two or more diagnoses. All students commonly sought at least one service, often in the form of family doctors, psychiatrists, and psychologists, though they noted seeking more on-campus supports, such as psychological services and academic accommodations.

Similar disconcerting findings are echoed in S. Jackson et al. (2018), as 57.1% of participants reported having at least one co-occurring psychiatric diagnosis, with depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and social anxiety disorder listed as most common. These high rates, complemented by the severity of the depression, anxiety and stress, speak to the pervasiveness of these conditions that have yet to be examined in such specificity. When these symptoms compromise other aspects of students' lives, beyond their academics, they can be overwhelming.



Van Hees et al. (2015) described how panic attacks, fatigue, and stress, among other manifestations of mental health issues – noted as one of the primary challenges in students’ lives – can serve as a major burden. One passage of a student’s interview aptly captures the draining nature of these collective challenges.

When I was living in student accommodation for example, it actually took me a half semester figuring out how to behave towards other students. I was suddenly incapable of doing many things that I was able to do before I started living in a student flat. I did not know how to live anymore (Van Hees et al., 2015, p. 1681).

*Anxiety*. Commonly listed as a prominent co-occurring condition with autism, anxiety affects high numbers of students (Accardo et al., 2019a; Anderson et al., 2018; Cai & Richdale, 2016; Gelbar et al., 2015; Hillier et al., 2018). Transitioning to college can represent a very trying time in finding oneself, as Van Hees et al. (2018) demonstrated that autistic students experienced anxiety as they constructed new social identities and worked to gain autonomy. Unless students’ transition plans and other supports emphasize mental health and anxiety, they may feel disadvantaged (Anderson & Butt, 2017).

Examining how anxiety impacts autistic students on more of an individual level reveals the intricacies and suppressive nature of the condition. One participant in MacLeod and Green (2009) said that anxiety caused his health to deteriorate and ultimately led him to withdraw from the university, despite his academic capabilities. Meanwhile, a participant in Ward and Webster (2018) said being in college had been tiring, but worthwhile. “Has it been overwhelming, stressful and traumatic? Absolutely! Though, I’m not thinking about giving up. I will achieve this through sheer determination” (p. 10). How students cope with anxiety varies according to their particular contexts and personal experiences, though.

Stressors associated with college life only worsen anxiety. LeGary (2017) detailed how, among the most typical types of stressors students experience, a majority of students had challenges with balancing their coursework with personal responsibilities, along with day-to-day performance of tasks associated with courses. The unpredictable nature of college (Van Hees et al., 2015), complemented by not always knowing how to deal with intense emotions (White et al., 2016), adds to the burdens. Social anxiety, in particular, is “significantly associated with having higher levels of perceived distress across academic, daily living, and social areas” (Lei et al., 2019, p. 3534).

For some students who experience anxiety when transitioning to college, they may seek keeping to themselves (Casement et al. 2017). Other students, who feel they possess support systems, enlist disability support staff members (Cai & Richdale, 2016) or obtain feedback from peers in their autism programs (Hillier et al., 2018). However, the onus should not be on the students to obtain assistance, as faculty who recognize anxious students are key to assisting their students in at least one sector of their lives (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). For instance, faculty can reduce experiences that may provoke stress, such as creating alternative methods of giving oral presentations, or encouraging students to use rehearsal tactics (Knott & Taylor, 2014). Similarly, providing extensions to assignments can be majorly helpful in lessening anxiety (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Autism programs that provide services like psychoeducation courses, noted as one of the most valuable supports by students (Lei et al., 2020b), appear to be very helpful in helping student manage their anxiety. As students in Briel and Getzel (2014) shared, they sought help from their institutions on managing stress.

No one technique appears to be a solution due to the degrading nature of anxiety, stress, and depression, and scholars like Hillier et al. (2018) suggest institutions determine new ways to

increase students' self-esteem. For example, one lecture in the autism program featured in Lei et al. (2020b) centered on how autistic students can discover and utilize their strengths in college. Engaging students in courses and activities related to their interests, as already described, appears to be beneficial in not only furthering their academics and careers, but also could be viable in reducing stress and discomfort. Scholars also recommend students engage in coping mechanisms that serve as distractions from anxiety-producing situations (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Additionally, autism programs can more proactively prioritize mental health issues (Lei et al., 2020b). In particular, one student mentioned that gaining mentorship allowed him to create tools to deal with depressive tendencies (Siew et al., 2017).

***Depression.*** Depression amongst students is a rising concern in the world of postsecondary education, and high rates among autistic students speak to this point. For contextual purposes it is worth noting that one Canadian study found that depression affected 26 percent of college students (Mackenzie et al., 2011). For autistic students, rates are sometimes even higher, as a few studies in this review illustrated. Gelbar et al. (2015) found that 47 percent of autistic students had a co-occurring depression diagnosis. S. Jackson et al. (2018) noted that 35.7% of students had depression, often with severe symptoms. What makes this mental health issue particularly alarming for autistic students is their lack of self-advocacy in being able to recognize their challenges and find useful resources (e.g., Gelbar et al., 2015). Depression often sets in when autistic students feel overwhelmed by the multitude of tasks and stimulation in college, leading them to withdraw from others (Ward & Webster, 2018). One participant in Casement et al. (2017) described heading back to his room during the middle of the day to sleep and cope with the exhaustion of college.

Loneliness, whether directly associated with anxiety or depression, or on its own, is omnipresent throughout much of the autism higher education literature (e.g., Gurbuz et al., 2019; S. Jackson et al., 2018; Van Hees et al., 2015; Vincent et al., 2017; Ward & Webster, 2018). Half of students in a study by Gelbar et al. (2015) noted being lonely. Even more startling, more than 75% of participations said they “felt left out, isolated, or lacking companionship ‘some of the time’ or ‘often’” (S. Jackson et al., 2018, p. 4). Autistic students may seek remaining solo at times, yet, on the other hand, they also seek friendships and do not want to experience isolation (Fleischer, 2012a). Van Hees et al. (2015) mentioned how participants felt alone both in handling daily life tasks independently, and also in social situations. One student, describing loneliness, said, “I’m a lonely person socially... I do not take the initiative. But if there is an offer, I accept it and want to go out” (p. 1679). Sometimes loneliness can lead to more serious ramifications, however: suicidal thoughts and attempts.

***Suicidality.*** Studies have also begun to report examples of suicidal feelings and experiences among autistic college students (Cai & Richdale, 2016; Cox et al., 2017; DeNigris et al., 2018). S. Jackson et al. (2018) have discussed suicide in the greatest depth among autistic college students. Among the 55 participants who completed The Suicide Behavior Questionnaire-Revised (SBQ-R; Osman et al., 2011), a whopping 41 (74.6%) had expressed having some types of suicidal behaviors at some point, with 30 having experienced suicidal thoughts in the past year and 10 mentioned that “it was ‘likely’ to ‘very likely’ that they would attempt suicide someday” (S. Jackson et al., 2018, p. 5). As the authors noted, these rates are significantly higher than suicidal attempts and ideation across college students more generally. The quantitative nature of the study, however, bears little insight into how students *describe* their suicidal thoughts and past attempts.

A few quotes from other studies offer greater reality to the anxiety and depression that accumulates, sometimes leading to suicidal sentiments. For example, after being put on academic probation, one student in Anderson and Butt (2017) said he “just broke down, quit one day, and two days later I am contemplating suicide...” (p. 3036). Meanwhile, a parent in a study by Cai and Richdale (2016) talked about her son experiencing stress in college while seeking support from disability support staff. He was “put in full-time because it was cheaper to do full-time than part-time. I thought this is going to be too many hours. He won’t cope. (... ) within a couple of weeks he was stressing out majorly, going suicidal...” (p. 37). Sarrett (2018) suggested that campuses must work on enhancing or creating suicide prevention programming for students with disabilities, and researchers call for further exploration on how suicide plays into the thought processes and experiences of autistic college students (S. Jackson et al., 2018).

Examining mental health issues collectively, as well as more precisely looking at specific symptoms, appears to be the next frontier for higher education autism researchers. Mental health issues affect such a large proportion of students, neurotypical or not, yet is often *not* frequently studied. The findings from these studies, though, shed an unfortunate truth that these challenges are unrelenting and not disappearing any time soon.

Autistic students’ experiences throughout college are marked by highs and lows, much like their neurotypical peers, though further nuanced by how their autism-related characteristics manifest in higher education settings and how co-occurring disabilities influence these experiences. Accounting for the holistic autistic college student is pivotal, for accounting for these various dimensions help in understanding the complete individual.

### *Exiting College*

While some literature attends to autistic students transitioning into the workforce, whether directly from high school or after college, little attention has paid to the process of students as they finish and/or complete their college career (credential or not) and into employment. Though this third theme of this proposal, and phase of students' time in college, is briefest, the process of their exits out of postsecondary education was identified as a key phase that shapes their lives.

Low graduation rates among college students is a persistent issue in academia and further complicated by the absence of firm references to autistic students' low graduation and employment rates relayed in studies featured within the systematic review. A few studies in the scholarship more generally, however, cast a lens on the disappointingly low proportions of students who reach these benchmarks.

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that, among autistic students who received special education services in high school, within up to eight years of being out of high school, just over half had graduated from any postsecondary education institution (50.7%; Snyder et al., 2016). While in line with graduation rates for students with other disabilities, this number is concerning on two fronts. First, it covers an eight-year period, meaning that even after such extended periods of time, graduation rates were still relatively low. Second, this data only reflects autistic students who received special education services in high school, so thus it fails to capture the wider breadth of autistic college students who were either diagnosed later, or never obtained supports in secondary schooling (Snyder et al., 2016).

Low employment rates area also concerning. Two studies give context to the scale of the problem. Shattuck et al. (2012) found that approximately 55% of autistic individuals were

employed, significantly less compared to peers with other disabilities like speech/language impairments (86.0%), learning disabilities (93.8%), and mental retardation (68.9%). While helpful, findings also fail to illustrate full-time or part-time status, salaries, and enjoyment or satisfaction in the workforce. Perhaps the best data we can assess comes from Sanford et al. (2011), who found that autistic young adults earn the second-lowest average hourly rate among all of the disabilities listed (\$7.70), with peers with mental retardation only slightly lower (\$7.60). Higher family income and possessing higher functional skills appear to be connected with grater odds of being employed or in school (Shattuck et al., 2012). Taylor and Seltzer (2011), meanwhile, noted that only four of 66 autistic young adults (not receiving supports or enrolled in postsecondary education) were competitively employed. These insights, while collectively informative, do not come from articles included within the systematic review, but rather additional sources I consulted. This further illustrates the limited outcomes data in most scholarship on autism in higher education.

Thankfully, some emergent work is addressing this topic. Most recently, Vincent (2020) unveiled the employment experiences of autistic university students and recent graduates. Among the notable findings are that autistic individuals often find recruitment tactics to be inaccessible and that institutional processes to prepare them for the job market are lacking (Vincent, 2020).

Postsecondary education institutions featured within studies in the systematic review note the lack of graduation and employment rates on autistic college students (e.g., Barnhill, 2016; Chown et al., 2018; Dallas et al., 2018). While a few studies lend some context on attainment rates of autistic college students, such as Karola et al. (2016), who discovered that there was a 0.08% increase from 2010/2011 (0.23%) to 2011/2012 (0.31%), this finding masks the *number*

of enrolled autistic students. After all, enrollment may have simply increased over the academic year. Often only vague findings are shared, as Chown et al. (2018) indicated that the percentage of autistic students who were employed, engaged in further schooling, or both “was substantially less than for all leavers” (p. 846).

College programs that track the pathways of their students offer limited insights on outcomes, with the understanding that these students had additional supports than their counterparts not engaged in programs. For instance, of the 52 participants in the Connections Program, 41 had graduated, seven were registered as students but not taking courses, two had dropped, one transferred, and one had unfortunately passed away (Hillier et al., 2018). Parents reported that 91% of Camp Campus participants (a pre-college program) were either currently enrolled in college, or had graduated (Retherford & Schreiber, 2015); the lack of disaggregation affords inadequate information, though. Encouragingly, 45% of parents noted that their students were full-time employees after graduation or were part-time employees while in school – the authors never stated, however, if these rates reflect graduating after high school or college (Retherford & Schreiber, 2015). “Even within disability statistics, already reflecting disadvantage, autistic adults are among the most marginalized” (MacLeod et al., 2013, p. 37).

The paucity of graduation and employment data speaks to the uncharted nature of capturing this information, particularly in light of the challenges that institutions face in merely maintaining students in college. While autistic students speak to having objectives related to their careers (e.g., Ames et al., 2016; Roberts & Birmingham, 2017; White et al., 2016), many lack preparedness in exploring career choices and gaining professional skills like writing resumes and engaging in informational interviews (Briel & Getzel, 2014). Thus, it should be a greater priority for institutions to provide these resources to students, as well as for studies to more intentionally



focus on career pathways and, ultimately, follow these students in order to obtain more robust graduation and employment data.

Beyond the hard metrics, researchers should consider examining the emotional experiences of students transitioning out of higher education, as Vincent (2019) demonstrated via his study of both college students and recent college graduates with credentials. Ultimately, this transition represented a mix of emotions, ranging from experiencing anxiety and loss, to reconciling identity development and feeling positivity in this departure. He noted how that autistic graduates experience many similarities to their neurotypical peers upon transitioning into a new chapter, but that these feelings “are frequently amplified given the specific differences related to their autism and, at times, other cooccurring diagnoses” (p. 9). Altogether, a mix of metrics on graduation and employment pathways, complemented by understanding the *human* component of what these transitions mean to autistic individuals, will be paramount in contributing to examining college across the lifespan.

### **Limitations of the Literature**

These next sections interrogate the inherent flaws of published work, based on issues outside of the scholars’ control, as well as identify how authors have fallen short in designing studies and deconstructing data. Perhaps most salient is how many authors (e.g., S. Jackson et al., 2018; Knott & Taylor, 2014; Ponomaryova et al., 2018) do not state any limitations whatsoever. First, I review the methodological limitations in how scholars have designed existing studies. Through reflecting on these flaws, as a means of critically assessing this work, I propose solutions to enhance studies’ rigor. Second, I highlight the substantive limitations of the literature based on omission of content related to several key factors. Here I also note theoretical limitations that compromise our interpretations of autistic college students. Throughout, I weave

in the implications of these limitations when accounting for autistic community college students – accounted for in my dissertation research – and I also illustrate the absence of this specific student population across most studies as a major substantive limitation.

### ***Methodological Limitations***

While reviewing the literature, I identified two main themes that compromise the methodological rigor of the studies. First, I address a number of issues associated with the samples. Second, albeit not as prevalent, several studies draw on measures that are disconnected from, or not practical for, the investigations at hand.

**Sampling Limitations.** Four primary issues compromise the sampling of the studies in this review. These include access to student samples, participant bias, lack of participant diversity, and problematic measures that authors instituted. Investigating each issue exposes flaws that may enlighten fellow scholars on how to avoid engaging in similar tactics.

**Access to Student Samples.** Various challenges inherent in researching autism in higher education, still nascent and small in scope, compromised some studies' rigor. At times authors relied on convenience samples (e.g., Anderson & Butt, 2017) to obtain autistic student participants, which could have distorted the samples' representativeness. That said, this makes sense given the lack of disclosure among autistic students to disability services, lest feeling comfortable to participate in a research study. Similarly, this factor was common among studies that gauged neurotypical students' perceptions, in that authors drew upon students who self-volunteered for human subjects studies (Matthews et al., 2015; Wood & Freeth, 2016) or psychology students aiming to earn extra credit or research participation credit (Obeid et al., 2015). Understanding neurotypical students' motives requires critical, thorough examination.

Additionally, sample sizes involving autistic college students often remained very small in many studies. Despite the fact that these studies provide thorough context on students' experiences, and that qualitative studies generally have smaller samples, what remains concerning is that our understandings of autistic college students across the studies in this review are limited to fewer than a few thousand individuals. This estimate excludes studies drawing on NLTS-2 data, which nearly doubles the number, as well as novel work from Sturm and Kasari (2019), which drew on the "largest sample of incoming college freshmen self-reporting a diagnosis of ASD to date," comprising more than 1,000 autistic students who completed their survey (p. 5). Through using Freshmen Survey data, the authors gathered new insights about autistic students' rates of co-occurring conditions and intellectual confidence. Generally, though, existent studies fail to capture the overall scope of the prominence of autistic students on college campuses throughout the world.

Low response rates also inhibited several studies, such as those that employed online surveys. Anderson and Butt (2017) yielded 14.5% of registered autistic college students at three Australian universities, Dallas et al. (2018) obtained a mere 7.6% percent of disability service providers, and Tipton and Blacher (2014) enlisted four percent of all registered individuals on campus, including faculty, students and staff. Given the large participant pools that these authors drew from, the statistics are not surprising, but these low numbers may caution fellow scholars from solely relying on online surveys as mechanisms for attaining a strong response rate.

While individual qualitative studies need not have a large sample size, particularly based on what the research questions and methodological framework aim to examine (Durdella, 2017), what often matters most is gathering rich detail about each individual (Creswell, 2013). That said, capturing data from autistic students may be difficult due to students with disabilities'

experiences in being exploited (Rule, 2008). This is a particular noteworthy issue for the study of autistic students attending community colleges, where many students are disassociated from their institutions due to only visiting campus to attend courses, and often possessing full-time jobs and/or raising families (Cohen et al., 2014). Certainly scholars studying autistic community college students will face further hurdles in enlisting participants.

***Participant Bias.*** Three types of biases also constrained studies in this review. First, self-selection bias was ubiquitous, as autistic self-advocates who are self-aware and comfortable in talking about their experiences encompassed a vast majority of samples (e.g., MacLeod et al., 2018; Mitchell & Beresford, 2014; Sarrett, 2018). Understandably, many studies' recruitment tools and processes may only reach and appeal to "successful" autistic college students (Gelbar et al., 2015, p. 50), thus providing a distorted picture of students who are not academically struggling. Similarly, autistic students participating in autism programs comprised a few studies' samples (e.g., Ames et al., 2016; Retherford & Schreiber, 2015). Among faculty participants, it is likely that instructors with greater investment in supporting autistic students, as well as those with greater familiarity with teaching them, participated in studies (e.g., Austin & Peña, 2017; Gobbo et al., 2018). Thus, it is difficult to distinguish the mentalities of faculty with varying degrees of experience and interest in teaching autistic students.

Second, self-favorability bias may prompt neurotypical individuals to respond to questions in socially desirable ways. DSPs featured in Dallas et al. (2018) may have indicated their desire for autistic college students' relatives to be more actively involved based on negative stigmatization if they answered in ways that disregarded relatives' engagement. College students' responses of their openness to engage with and befriend autistic peers may likewise be inaccurate based on self-serving biases (Nevill & White, 2011). Studies tended to illustrate that

faculty (Zeedyk et al., 2018) and students (Nevill & White, 2011) with personal connections to autistic students may be more understanding of them, though it remains difficult to ascertain the level of truthfulness in responses.

Third, confirming the accuracy of autistic students' self-reports of college-related experiences is hard to ascertain, unless their perceptions of particular experiences are in alignment with other individuals, such as parents. For instance, Retherford and Schreiber (2015) found incongruence between students and parents regarding the degree to which they reported students as engaging in daily life tasks following participation in a transition program. DeNigris et al. (2018) warned that students' self-reports of bullying could be askew and biased. Similarly, Hotez et al. (2018) raised concerns over the lack of triangulation between how students described their experiences and observed behaviors. While harmful to question autistic students' self-reports, lest a population often doubted and derided by neurotypical individuals who hold social power, this issue only raises the necessity of implementing safeguards and alternative measures for assessing students' perspectives and abilities.

***Lack of Participant Diversity.*** Due to societal underreporting of autism, both in terms of lack of diagnoses and keeping autism a private matter, particularly among individuals who do not identify as white, male, and/or from upper-income households, scholarly attention has been largely placed on individuals with the greatest privileges based on race, gender, and class, despite their disability. Numerous studies have centered almost entirely on white males, whether via qualitative studies (e.g., Cox et al., 2017) or drawing on NLTS-2 data (e.g., Wei et al., 2017). Such persistent racial inequities, particularly when studies do not describe this issue whatsoever (e.g., Anderson et al., 2018; Sarrett, 2018), or fail to disaggregate students who do not identify as Caucasian (e.g., McMorris et al., 2019), is alarming and reinforce a narrative that disregards

students of color. The main mechanism to employ in rectifying this systemic issue is not only ensuring that more students of color and female students are diagnosed, but also students attaining access to services in college. These techniques, collectively, may help raise their prominence in studies among autistic college students. However, the stigmatization of autism, complemented by other minoritized identities like gender and race, may contribute to reduce students' participation. Similarly, when family household income is listed in studies, they typically include participants from upper-class families (e.g., Anderson & Butt, 2017; Roux et al., 2017). Akin to the omission of other variables, socioeconomic status is sometimes disregarded from the discussion (e.g., Anderson et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2017).

Three other defining identities of many college students are almost entirely absent from the studies reviewed: sexual orientation, gender identity, and first-generation status. Shedding light on how students with these and other identities navigate higher education, in tandem with being autistic, is imperative.

We must also consider how community colleges – discussed in more depth later as viable institutions for autistic students – serve not only the highest proportions of postsecondary students with disabilities, but also a majority of students from other minoritized populations, including undocumented students, students of color (Cohen et al., 2014), and high school graduates from the lowest-income quartile (Bailey et al., 2006). Ensuring that studies on autistic community college students include participants who possess these additionally minoritized identities will more accurately reflect the landscape of students enrolled at these institutions. Working against this hopeful ideal is that many individuals from minoritized backgrounds, including African American children, receive delayed or incorrect autism diagnoses (Burkett et al., 2015). Consequently, the narrative of autistic (community) college students tends to remain

limited to those who have racial, educational, and economic privilege. Dismantling the false representation of autism as solely a white, middle- and upper-income male experience is crucial (Dosch, 2019), not only in changing perceptions, but also in ensuring the perspectives of autistic students who encapsulate greater diversity on many identity fronts will be spotlighted.

**Problematic Measures.** Albeit not as prevalent as sampling issues, several studies draw on measures that are disconnected or not practical for the investigations at hand. It is worth noting that while no one common measurement-related shortcoming hit a majority of studies, several trends emerged in this review.

**Improper Scales.** First, some pieces are flawed based on having integrated scales that are neither suitably designed for, nor can items always be adapted to meet the needs of and reflect the identities of neurodivergent individuals (e.g., Hillier et al. [2018] using the UCLA Loneliness Scale by Russell [1986]; Hotez et al. [2018] incorporating the Academic Self-Efficacy Survey by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler [2005]; White et al. [2016] using the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire [SACQ; Baker & Siryk, 1999]. For instance, Shmulsky et al. (2017) utilized the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) and acknowledged how it may prove ineffective among autistic college students; their self-awareness of the measure's flaws is commendable, yet the problem of integrating irrelevant instruments persists. Few scholars are sadly as forthcoming about the weaknesses of the measures they incorporate. While scholars are not expected to solely rely on autism-centered instruments, particularly because of their small quantity and own limitations (see below), this lack of critical assessment proves concerning.

**Autism-Related Instruments.** Second, too often scholars have relied on and failed to interrogate autism-focused instruments. Indeed, some exceptions exist (e.g., Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015, who adapted the Autism Survey by Stone [1987], through adding items to enhance

internal consistency of this measure examining autism knowledge) exist, but this is a rarity. Several studies (e.g., Ashbaugh, 2017; Gardiner & Iarocci, 2004; Nevill & White, 2011; Ward & Webster, 2008) have long employed the Autism Spectrum Quotient (ASQ; Baron-Cohen et al., 2001), a test featuring 50 items that determines participants' degree of possessing autistic traits. While items from the ASQ and later-revised 10-item version (AQ-10; Allison et al., 2012) are problematic (Lundin et al., 2019) and certainly limiting in giving full scope to how autism manifests differently across each individual, scholars have continued to place much confidence in this generalizable measure.

Other measures are also compromising. DeNigris et al. (2018) drew on the Social Responsiveness Scale-2 (SRS-2) by Constantino and Gruber (2012), which features dozens of items that determine “the severity of autistic traits” (p. 669). Reaching a cutoff essentially equates to being viewed as autistic, based on these studies' portrayals. The scale's implementation in this manner, albeit to contextualize autistic students in light of their bullying experiences, comes across as not only disjointed, but also dehumanizing. Not only does the measure utilize the word *severity*, which suggests the idea of an illness or disease, but also it does not represent a diagnostic mechanism. Other scholars (Matthews et al., 2015; Obeid et al., 2015) have relied on the Broad Autism Phenotype Questionnaire (BAPQ; Hurley et al., 2007), which has its merits in describing autism characteristics, yet participants may take umbrage with items' medicalized focus. Time after time, scholars have drawn from instruments that may be viewed as abstract and irrelevant to autistic student participants, or portray autistic individuals in a deficit-based manner from the eyes of neurotypical participants. Removing ableist language from existent measures and replacing them with more thoughtful alternatives, as suggested by Bottema-Beutel et al. (2020), are impactful in eradicating harmful discourse.



*National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2)*. Third, studies utilizing data from the NLTS-2 failed to emphasize the lack of representativeness in their participant pool of autistic students who not only were diagnosed at a young age, but also obtained special education services in high school (e.g., Roux et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2014). This dataset is also particularly outdated, based on the experiences of students who entered high school in the early 2000s. While studies examining NLTS-2 data can continue to reveal rich and nuanced insights, these must be situated within a particular point in time, as the landscape of autistic students entering higher education has massively evolved and expanded in just the past several years.

*Lack of Measures*. Fourth, some quantitative studies have not utilized any standardized autism-focused measures, which compromises understandings of the main inquiry, such as an inability to interpret the difficulty level of autistic students' note taking content (Reed et al., 2016). For qualitative studies, sometimes questions are framed imprecisely, per the notion of autistic students being asked about accommodations and support services they "have used/prefer to use" (Accardo et al., 2019b, p. 4). These terms should be disaggregated, and they do not provide any opportunity for ascertaining the frequency of tools utilized.

*Autistic Agency*. Fifth, only some authors described their strategies to ensure that interviewees had agency over where interviews were conducted (e.g., Wiorkowski, 2015), as well as the format, such as being held online, via text, or phone (Sarrett, 2018). Many techniques may have inhibited the quality and rigor of interviews, as several instances illustrate. Fleischer (2012a) engaged in prompting, which could have changed or biased participants' narratives. In order to avoid causing disruption to their course schedule, Bell et al. (2017) maintained that individual interviews not exceed 30 minutes. However, this strategy may have also inhibited

students from gaining comfort with the interviewers and having neither the space nor time to open up. Though Mitchell and Beresford (2014) were well intentioned in allowing parents to sit in on interviews, in an effort to provide comfort to their potentially anxious children, parents' mere presence could have distorted interviewees' answers; on the other hand, Van Hees et al. (2018) conducted interviews separately and avoided this issue. At times, studies gave little to no context on how or where interviews were held, or even procedures and data analysis (e.g., McMorris et al., 2019). Qualitative scholars must demonstrate both more significant consideration in how they stage interviews with autistic student participants and greater clarity in how they detail methodological procedures in the studies they publish.

### ***Substantive Limitations of the Literature***

First, I discuss the lack of inquiry into autistic community college students in light of these institutions' viability for supporting their academic and professional pathways. Second, I examine the absence of attention to autistic students at institutions in non-Westernized countries; only two studies were conducted in (Bellon-Harn et al., 2018; Obeid et al., 2018). Third, I note the pervasiveness of deficit-based framing of autistic college students. Fourth, I conclude with addressing the lack of theory in most studies on autism in higher education.

**Community College Exclusion and Lack of Disaggregation.** Of the 108 studies examined in this systematic literature review, a mere seven (6%) were solely concentrated in a community college setting or entirely focused on this student population (Brown & Coomes, 2016; Brown, 2017; Nachman & Brown, 2020; Peña & Kocur, 2013; Reed et al., 2016; Roux et al., 2015; Wei et al., 2014). Though 30 studies in this systematic review included some data on community colleges, or featuring students who were/are enrolled in community colleges as a portion of the data primarily centered on university students (e.g., Dallas, 2018; S. Jackson,

2018; Sarrett, 2018), most ( $n=16$ ) failed to disaggregate community college experiences in relationship to 4-year institutions. Considering that these students' experiences are often not unpacked, their participation in studies does not shed much light. The limited amount of community college data in the extant literature is particularly problematic for a number of reasons.

Community colleges can be beneficial to students with disabilities due to offering a variety of helpful elements. From smaller classes and specialized career training (Evans et al., 2017) to open admissions policies, community colleges offer greater accessibility for students with varying academic abilities (McEathron et al., 2013).

Some unique aspects of community colleges are particularly helpful for autistic students. For one, open admissions policies may lessen stress for students who cope with anxiety and thus do not need to go through a standard interview process. Additionally, community colleges' range of certifications and degree programs may serve autistic students who have specialized interests (Highlen, 2016). For autistic students not quite ready to live independently, whether due to self-advocacy challenges or hypersensitivity, starting at community colleges may offer new adjustments without the added stress of having to be on their own, too (Perner, 2002). Finally, as more teaching-oriented institutions with fewer students per course, community colleges boast faculty who may be able to offer more specialized attention to autistic students (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). Autistic students may find community colleges more comfortable due to these institutions having the stereotype of possessing more nurturing faculty (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000). All of these reasons suggest the value that community colleges may afford to autistic students.

Autistic students' enrollment rates at community colleges, complemented by high enrollment of students with disabilities more generally, underscore the necessity of why scholars

must more strongly study these students' experiences. Sanford et al. (2011) indicated that young adults with disabilities are enrolled at 2-year or community colleges at much higher rates (37%) than at 4-year colleges or universities (15%). Similarly, as illustrated earlier, enrollment among autistic students tends to be twice as high at 2-year colleges than their 4-year counterparts (32.2% vs. 17.4%; Snyder et al., 2016). Consequently, it remains startling and surprising, from a pure enrollment standpoint, why there is a dearth of scholarly attention to community college students with disabilities, including autism.

For instance, both Barnhill (2016) and Briel and Getzel (2014) did not distinguish the differences across community colleges and 4-year institutions, leading particular institutional services and students' experiences, respectively, to become lost in the data. Likewise, Accardo et al. (2019b) did not explore how community college transfers – more than half of their sample – may have utilized accommodations and support services differently from their counterparts who had always attend 4-year institutions. Unfortunately, it is often considered acceptable, even if inadvertent, to lump in community college students and transfer students with 4-year institution peers, despite institutions' lack of alignment in educational trajectories and perhaps students' identities, too. We must note, too, that some community colleges feature baccalaureate programs, thus making the situation even more complex. Unless scholars break down and separate the data – even as simple as noting points in tables and in descriptions of particular participants or institutions – these issues will persist and compromise truly knowing the uniqueness of autistic community college students and the colleges that serve them.

*Westernized Country Focus.* Almost all studies entailed data coming from highly industrialized countries (CIA, 2008), including the following: Australia (e.g., Anderson & Butt, 2018; Thompson et al., 2019; Ward, 2018); Belgium (e.g., Tops et al., 2018; Van Hees et al.,

2018); Canada (e.g., Ames et al., 2016; Roberts & Birmingham, 2017; Ncube et al., 2019); Israel (Ponomaryova et al., 2018) Japan (part of the sample for Someki et al., 2018); Spain (part of the sample for Casement et al., 2017); Sweden (Fleischer, 2012a; Fleischer, 2012b); and the United Kingdom (e.g., Chown et al., 2018; Knott & Taylor, 2014; Searle et al., 2019; Vincent et al., 2017; Vincent, 2019). A majority of studies come from one Westernized country: The United States (e.g., Cox et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2017). Only three studies reviewed draw upon some data from non-Westernized countries: India (Bellon-Harn et al., 2018); Lebanon (Obeid et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2019); and Zambia (Chansa-Kabali et al., 2019).

These trends continue to illustrate how studies have emerged from countries that generally recognize autism as a disability, though, of course, there are geographical, social, and political nuances within each country and study regarding how autism is framed and *treated* (concerning, as this connotes a disease or problem) in some cases. Scholars and readers alike cannot ignore the lack of geographic diversity in the studies that emerge on autism in higher education, a much broader issue, for it shows how access to resources, societal portrayals, and diagnosis prominence influence the degree to which some deem autism as worth addressing.

*Deficit-Based Framing.* Sadly, despite many of these studies making headway in offering enlightenment on autism in postsecondary education, some authors have fallen prey to using deficit-based language that minimizes autistic students' abilities. This troubling framing stands in stark contrast to Neurodiversity Theory, first introduced by scholars like Singer (1999), who acted in defiance of traditional psychological interpretations of autism and instead embraced the notion of neurological diversity among autistic people. "Autism is not an illness, but rather a constitutional part of who they truly are" (Singer, 1999, p. 63). Such neurological self-awareness, as Singer described, works against medicalized framing and instead pushes agency on the autistic

individual to take ownership of their identities. No articles I reviewed explicitly employed Neurodiversity Theory – to be discussed in more depth later – though several made references to the term and movement more broadly (see Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Sarrett, 2018).

Two theoretical perspectives integrated into Gobbo and Shmulsky’s (2014) study were problematic due to deficit-based framing: mindblindness (operating under the assumption that some autistic individuals lack empathy and perspective taking) and the Weak Central Coherence theory of autism (autistic individuals often cannot adopt top-down processing). The authors also noted autistic students’ executive functioning challenges. Though the authors’ work has since shifted to embrace a more positive viewpoint of autistic students that centers on autistic identity development (e.g., Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2016), the aforementioned deficit-based theories are nonetheless concerning and trivialize the strengths that autistic students possess.

Both Matthews et al. (2015) and Tops et al. (2018) used *high functioning autism*, which suggests levels of difference, or even severity, of autism. I propose disregarding terminology related to *functionality*, *difference* and *severity* entirely, as it implies that autistic individuals possess negative, varying degrees to which their socially-deemed unacceptable traits manifest. Instead, I only use it to illustrate how literature or participants frame autistic people. Additionally, some scholars shared beliefs that possessed negative narratives. McKeon et al. (2013) describe autistic students as possible to “monopolize the discussion” and that “it is not surprising that a hallmark of ASD is limited social engagement” (p. 358). Tops et al. (2018) anticipated “high functioning” autistic students to possess lower metacognitive knowledge regarding study strategies than their “typical students” (p. 146). Many scholars instead use the more socially acceptable word *neurotypical*, which places emphasis on the neurology of the individual (Blume, 1998).

Several additional examples illustrate worrisome wording. For instance, Zeedyk et al. (2018) supposed that autistic students may not have participated in the study due to “social deficits core to ASD” (p. 9). Fleischer (2012b) described Asperger’s as “an impairment that is difficult to detect” (p. 60). Lizotte (2018) referred to participants as having “social deficit areas” (p. 187). Collectively, these terms and theories are both unflattering and denigrating.

Portraying autistic college students as capable individuals who do not have *deficits*, but rather *differences*, conveys the message that these students, unlike neurotypical students, merely engage in and make sense of the world in a unique manner. This narrative also shifts the discourse away from the notion that societal norms engaged in by neurotypical individuals should be prioritized, followed, and viewed as inherently better. Though we cannot speculate that authors who use deficit-based terminology have malicious intentions or are uninformed about autism, as that would be reckless, hopefully they will employ more intentional and responsible terminology in portraying autism as different, rather than deficient.

*Theoretical Absence.* The systematic literature review elucidates the surprising atheoretical slant of most published studies on autism in postsecondary education. In fact, only 16% of articles reviewed ( $n=17$ ) noted particular theories and/or paradigms that informed the development of their studies. While we cannot assume what particular factors accounted for such omission, scholars’ overemphasis on tools meant to provide successful interventions fail to draw upon any theories. Most qualitative pieces were also neither guided by theories, nor note using grounded theory. Instead, authors tended to jump right into the problem or issue at hand without providing context on what frameworks and epistemologies shape the direction of their studies. Such articles reduce our understandings of how autism is understood and conceptualized or, even

worse, propagate harmful beliefs about autism when scholars employ medicalized and deficit-based framing.

Though few researchers addressing autism in postsecondary education settings possess a formal academic background in studying higher education, these are among the individuals who have tended to utilize apropos theories to shape their work. For instance, Austin and Peña (2017) employed a social justice lens and constructivism in thinking about how faculty members may have shared and reflected upon their stories, in relation to how they, as authors, also made sense of evolving knowledge of students with disabilities. Similarly, Brown and Coomes (2016), who situated their analysis of community college practitioners under a pragmatic paradigm, recognized these participants' lived experiences and embraced how social constructionism sees disability as more of a social creation. This approach values autism as a type of diversity; in this manner, Brown and Coomes (2016) defied the functional limitations perspective that frames autism as a deficit. In the same vein, Anderson (2018) incorporated the Social Model of Disability, which treats autism as a difference and veers away from medicalized, deficit-based notions; this model does not diminish the fact that autistic individuals have diagnoses and unique needs, but rather embraces greater self-advocacy among autistic individuals.

Identity formation is also salient in a few studies. Both Morrison et al. (2013) and White et al. (2016) relied on Chickering and Riesser's (1993) Seven Vectors of Development. Morrison et al. (2013) paid particular attention to the three vectors related to competence – managing emotions, and moving through autonomy toward interdependence – in an effort to spotlight autistic students' identities and capabilities. This theory, commonly used in college student development pieces, is particularly powerful in recognizing the complexity and aptitude of each student. MacLeod et al. (2013) applied Social Identity Theory and Social Categorisation Theory



by Turner (1999) due to individuals determining their self-concepts based on their group membership and perceived status; some individuals may affiliate more with a group identity (membership), as opposed to their own personal identity.

Other studies have accounted for how context shapes autistic students' lives. Cox et al. (2017) utilized Astin's (1991) Inputs, Environments and Outcomes (I-E-O) model that recognizes how college students' outcomes reflect both their backgrounds and their college settings. Importantly, this theory positions the student as part of a larger, multilayered fabric. In a similar manner, Social Cognitive Theory by Bandura (1986) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994), as implemented by Wei et al. (2017), posits the personal factors and environmental settings that influence individual behaviors. Altogether, these theories demonstrate promising avenues in framing autistic students as well-rounded individuals with many influences and variables shaping how they experience college.

However, for all of the empowering, targeted, and novel theories applied, some scholars have leaned too heavily on defeating, irrelevant, or outdated frameworks. For instance, Fleischer (2012a) referred to Goffman's theory of stigma (1963, 1990) and supposed that autistic individuals feel alienated from society due to communication differences and thus lack immersion in social interactions. This theory reinforces the obsolete misperception that, should autistic students not adapt to neurotypical society, they will be left out. Scholars must avoid incorporating theories that paint autistic students as less capable in belonging to, or even adapting to, a world that is largely not designed to serve their needs, ways of learning, and mechanisms of communicating. They must also work to upend convention that autistic students are the individuals worth changing. Why cannot it be neurotypical individuals or, at the very

least, both groups have a greater understanding for how autistic individuals participate in society?

### **Study Contributions**

My contributions to the research literature are threefold, many of them deriving from the most flagrant omissions I identified in the systematic literature review. For one, I utilize Neurodiversity Theory (Singer, 1999) as the framework that undergirds both research design and data analysis. Considering that much of the scholarship on autism and higher education scholarship neither incorporates theory nor explains how and why researchers make particular methodological choices, this study diverges from traditional studies in its foundation. In this manner, my study advances the field by directly drawing on Neurodiversity Theory, most explicitly harkening back to autism and helping us understand how autistic people make sense of and navigate through the world (Sinclair, 1993). Neurodiversity Theory, which threads the study's design and my interpretation of the findings, prioritizes the autistic perspective, a gaping hole in much existent literature.

Additionally, I concentrate on a community college autism transition program, and the autistic students who occupy the space, as the centerpiece of my inquiry. Evaluating the program as a structural mechanism in an institutional environment rarely examined in the literature offers a unique glimpse into the worlds that many autistic students inhabit.

Furthermore, I build upon the most thorough scholarship that prioritizes autistic students' perspectives by similarly engaging in multiple interviews, but also a number of other methods (demographic surveys, observations, and written reflections) that jointly amount to a thorough composite of their experiences. Consequently, our interpretations are informed by a variety of

modes in which they can share their acumen and wisdom. My emphasis on Neurodiversity and, by virtue, autistic agency, similarly accentuates the importance of their perspectives.

### **Chapter III: Theoretical Framework**

Neurodiversity Theory represents the most important piece of my theoretical framework. However, in establishing the research design and analysis for my dissertation, I recognized the necessity of both accounting for existent literature and conceptualizations of disability and autism, as well as pinpointing the appropriate and necessary knowledge bases for informing my study. I frame this section to illustrate my iterative understandings of disability and autism. In this manner I relay my own stages of processing disability and autism in a theoretical manner that led me to identify the most substantive lenses for shaping my dissertation. Accordingly, I begin by discussing the roles of the Social Model of Disability and Critical Disability Theory (CDT) as offering viable perspectives, albeit not autism-specific. Later I position Neurodiversity Theory at the core of my theoretical framework, with ableism and autistic studies and culture as important pieces worth accounting for and CDT acting as a peripheral perspective. Altogether I cohesively frame autistic community college students' experiences.

#### **Social Model of Disability**

One prevalent framework that guides disability research is the Social Model of Disability (Shakespeare, 2006). While this model is not quite as deficit-based as medicalized views, critics like Reindal (2008) noted how the social model centers on disabled individuals' experiences being directly based on environmental, social and cultural factors, which is a limiting perspective. Social barriers associated with disabilities cannot be discounted, but that in tandem there should be focus on the impairments associated with the particular disability itself (Reindal,

2010). “Much of what is believed about disability results from meanings attached by those who are not disabled and challenges the assumptions upon which those meanings rest” (Jones, 1996, p. 350). The model also fails to examine disabled individuals’ intersectional identities (Peña et al., 2016), and thus lack a multidimensional perspective of these people. Consequently, I decided to not draw on this model for my dissertation work.

### **Critical Disability Theory**

Critical Disability Theory (CDT; Hosking, 2008), in both subtle and explicit ways, grounds my autism-focused work. Critical Disability Studies (CDS), emerging as popular in the early 2000s, was aimed to defy traditional binary ways of thinking of disability inherent in more social models (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Shildrick, 2012). With its focus on creating change and elevating disabled individuals, CDS acted against much of the disability literature that held deficit-oriented frameworks and verbiage (Vaccaro et al., 2015).

CDT, as a component of CDS, has many key factors. According to Evans et al. (2017), CDT centers on disability’s fluidity and intersectionality, societal influence shaping people’s experiences, focus on social justice and rights, and connections between impairment and environment. For one, disability is moderated by other salient identities in individuals’ lives and is far from static. Disabilities influence people in various ways based on new experiences and how certain traits presents themselves. On the flip side, society, too, can have a role in contributing to how disabled individuals view themselves (Evans et al., 2017). Though social structures and other people may contribute to oppressive practices (Evans et al., 2017; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009), CDS holds that disabled people work toward self-empowerment (Peña et al., 2016). Disabled individuals have rights and are agentic in shaping their experiences (Hosking, 2008). Not always do they see their disabilities as a disadvantage (Hosking, 2008).

While my dissertation research does not follow a CDT framework due to its lack of attention to autistic people, I value its focus on promoting “voices that have been historically subjugated” (Shildrick, 2012, p. 37) and accounting for the complexity of disability and how disabled people view their experiences in relationship to the disability. As such, certain CDT principles guide the more Neurodiversity-focused, autism-specific framework that establishes my work.

### **Neurodiversity Theory**

The most salient and substantive theoretical grounding for my study derives from Neurodiversity Theory. Neurodiversity first emerged in the general discourse more than two decades ago (Blume, 1998; Sinclair, 1993; Singer, 1999) as a way of prioritizing the perspective of autistic individuals and reflecting how some individuals are wired differently from the rest of society. “Neurodiversity inherently honors variation; there is no one way of being, communicating, or knowing” (Brown et al., 2019, p. 33). Among the unofficial tenets of Neurodiversity Theory and the movement stemming from it, as described, include: engaging in activism and social justice efforts that pushes for full inclusion of autistic people in society and greater acceptance of neurodivergent perspectives (Kapp, 2020; Strand, 2017); encouraging families to advocate for autistic people’s rights (Kapp, 2018); and challenging the medicalized conceptions and stigmatization association with disability (Kapp et al., 2013).

While Neurodiversity, also referred to as Neurodiversity Theory, lacks a main figure and text, some would credit Sinclair’s (1993) piece as the unofficial spark by responding to how parents had aimed to relate to their autistic children, and did not always see autistic people as agentic – not tragic – individuals. Blume and Singer, both belonging to the InLv mailing list, represent trailblazers in establishing this ambiguous movement and framework. Each offered

distinct contribution in propagating the notion of Neurodiversity, with Blume (1998) spreading the word in *The New York Times* and Singer catapulting the dialogue to more disability-focused audiences in a 1999 piece (Dekker, 2020).

Individuals are neurodivergent, and collectively they and neurotypical people comprise the Neurodiversity movement (Walker, 2014; Kapp, 2020). “The movement arguably adopts a spectrum or dimensional concept to neurodiversity, in which people’s neurocognitive differences largely have no natural boundaries” (Kapp, 2020, p. 2).

Blume (1998) considered Neurodiversity “every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general” (p. 4), viewing the framework’s potential in shaping how we make sense of human differences. Neurodiversity takes a page from how other minoritized populations are framed by considering autism as a type of human diversity, often focusing on the strengths of individuals and recognizing that many challenges they may experience are contextual (Robertson, 2010; Walker, 2014). The disability community possesses many facets and may be disparate due to many forms of diversity within (Baker, 2006); it is further nuanced when considering neurodivergent people who comprise the community. In this way there is no one definition of normal functioning or mindset; social dynamics within the neurodivergent community are akin to those in other types of human diversity, such as social power inequalities based on identities related to gender and ethnicity (Walker, 2014).

Broderick and Ne’eman (2008) found that “dominant narratives about autism commonly draw upon metaphors that themselves rely upon and reproduce a binary divide between cultural notions of ‘normalcy and ‘abnormalcy’” (p. 466). They noted how autism is often painted as a disease that must be cured, as opposed to a disability. This is reinforced by books that include the notion of autism as “alien,” reproducing them as otherworldly, not normal, individuals. Again,

we see the prominence of non-autistic, or neurotypical, individuals setting the norms and structures, thereby engaging in oppressive acts. As a counterpoint, autistic people have crafted memoirs that discuss how they are alienated by others (Straus, 2013). Autism's push as a type of neurodiversity often derives from autistic individuals themselves (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008), who have embraced what the movement entails.

In addition to arguing for dismantling oppression prompted by neurotypical individuals, the Neurodiversity movement promotes the rights of autistic individuals (Kapp, 2020), and contends that they should be treated with equality and inclusivity (Walker, 2014). Whether or not social systems enact tools that account for neurodivergent individuals' needs is an entirely different story altogether.

Autistic individuals are not to be pitied, but rather embraced for what they can afford to others (Sinclair, 1993). The Neurodiversity movement can be a boon for autistic individuals, which shifts the discourse from a psychological lens to more neuroscientific theories through self-advocates viewing autism as a neurological disability (Ortega, 2009). Scholars have noted the misconception that the Neurodiversity movement does not entail autistic individuals sharing their challenges (Kapp et al., 2013). Here is where a dichotomy emerges, in both acknowledging difficulties associated with being autistic – due to how society situates and portrays autistic individuals – and embracing the beautiful gifts of interpreting the world differently.

Further complicating Neurodiversity is its many critiques, as illustrated in Russell (2020), who recognized that not everyone who is neurodivergent agrees that they belong in this community, whether due to a lack of a diagnosis or lack of kinship. Russell (2020) pointed out that a common form of affiliation is having a shared identity; in the case of Neurodiversity, or having autistic people as members, it is seemingly contingent on having a diagnosis. However,

such affiliation exists in stark contrast to many neurodivergent people who do not align with medicalized models. Furthermore, critics may contend that the individuals active in the Neurodiversity movement may not be representative of all neurodivergent people, particularly those who have not had the technological resources to build and find community. Accordingly, Neurodiversity lacks a common perspective, theme, and message at times, even with its principles of being driven by and for autistic people.

### **Ableism**

One concept commonly associated with disability is ableism, which has merits in guiding this research study due to its prominence and pervasiveness within the autism community. I situated ableism underneath Neurodiversity Theory to illustrate the notion of how the Neurodiversity movement aims to eradicate this long-prevalent problem. Ableist mentalities view disability as something to be tolerated (Campbell, 2008). Impacting both conscious and subconscious states, ableism, according to Campbell (2008), becomes internalized via how society commonly perpetuates negative sentiments about disability. Ableism leads disabled individuals to engage in passing to conceal their disabilities and fail to interrogate normalcy (Campbell, 2008). Needless to say, ableism emphasizes ability preferences, or what is considered acceptable (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012).

The pervasiveness of ableism in larger culture has led disabled individuals themselves to hold these same negative sentiments about disability, thus contributing to internalized ableism, as evidenced in much literature (Campbell, 2008; Evans et al., 2017; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2016; Kattari et al., 2018). Internalized ableism takes many forms, including fears of engaging with other disabled people due to being viewed negatively (dispersal), aiming to conform to what is seen as normal (emulating the norm), and embracing identities that do not align with their own



(holding disabled subjectivities; Campbell, 2008). “Internalized ableism can mean the disabled subject is caught ‘between a rock and a hard place’; in order to attain the benefit of a ‘disabled identity’ one must constantly participate in processes of disability disavowal, aspiring towards normativity, a state of near ablebodiedness, or at very least to effect a state of ‘passing’” (Campbell, 2008, p. 156). This exhausting process leads disabled people to fabricate their identities (Campbell, 2008) and, in the case of autistic people, struggle to form positive autistic identities (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2016). Societal microaggressions only spur further ableism, ingrained in our culture and determining who is “disabled enough” (Kattari et al., 2018, p. 487).

Counteracting ableism, and internalized ableism just as importantly, requires following a number of steps. Brown et al. (2019) sounded the call for researchers to more explicitly examine and point out ableism within communities featuring intersectional oppressed identities, such as autistic community college students of color. In my dissertation, I briefly touch on this point among some of my participants who possess those particular minoritized identities; however, students generally did not discuss these identities, even when prompted to discuss other salient identities they experience. Additionally, involving participants as co-researchers through having them more actively play into the process can disrupt ableism (Brown et al., 2019). As illustrated later, I employ a few measures that work toward this end. Practitioners pushing for autism acceptance, as a type of social justice movement, promotes greater equality and engagement among the autism community (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2016). An emergent autistic culture also elevates autistic agency and thus pushes against ableist mentalities.

### **Autism in Society: Autistic Studies and Autistic Culture**

Autism’s burgeoning space in society has led to research and subcultures surfacing on how members of this heterogenous community find one another and form relationships. Autistic

studies, or autism studies (often used interchangeably) translates the intricacies associated with disability. Friedner's and Block's 2017 study showed how a Google search of *autism studies* did not yield any information on how autistic people themselves discuss their experiences, instead centered on academic programs. Autism is difficult to define, as scholars note. Viewing autism as a concept allows for exploring "a variety of meanings, to encompass the wide range of ways that the term autism is invoked, deployed, mobilized, rejected, negotiated, defied, defined, and discussed" (Cascio, 2018, p. 253). In this way, the conceptual perspective of autism allows for individual meaning making, in which we can interrogate both old and new conceptions of the disability (Cascio, 2018), particularly since common perspectives harken back to its medical component (Straus, 2013).

Straus (2013) considered autism, like other minoritized populations, as being based on a diagnosis, choice, self-identification and classification by others. That said, the meanings that autistic individuals attach to their lives and disabilities matter most, especially since only recently have they been able to create communities and discuss their identities (Block, 2015; Straus, 2013). Altogether, autistic studies is challenging to operationalize due to its lack of formal definition, but centers on autistic people interrogating the concept (Cascio, 2018). Through autistic activists sharing their experiences and demonstrating a critical stance on how these individuals are perceived by others and navigate life (Friedner & Block, 2017), an autistic culture emerges, one that "is becoming a source of identity and pride within a rapidly growing community" (Straus, 2013, p. 549). Essentially autistic studies works to serve as a backdrop for Neurodiversity Theory, even if not classified in such a manner.

In the early 2000s a number of formal organizations focused on supporting and uplifting autistic people – *by* autistic people – surfaced, thus illustrating the relative nascency of the entire

movement (Robertson & Ne’eman, 2008). This amorphous autistic culture surfaces in online contexts through organizations, discussion boards, and events (Roberts & Ne’eman, 2008), or even via the robust Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, led by an autistic individual: Ari Ne’eman (ASAN; Broderick & Ne’eman, 2018). That autistic people form the conversations and actively drive objectives via these platforms illustrates the power of self-propelled movements.

“Representation is established by who can claim control over the narratives used to define a person, place, experience or term, and the parent narrative about autism has had far more time to disseminate than the self-advocate one” (Broderick & Ne’eman, 2008, p. 471). In many spaces, however, autistic culture is damaged by decisions shaped by neurotypical individuals, as Jaarsma and Welin (2012) described.

My own professional and leadership experiences have contributed to autistic culture in the college atmosphere. As an author of journal articles across various higher education publications, including *The Review of Higher Education* (Cox et al., 2020), *College Student Affairs Journal* (Miller et al., 2020), *Journal of Postsecondary Education* (Nachman, 2020), *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* (Nachman et al., 2020), and *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* (Nachman & Brown, 2020), I have lent my own ideas and views to the autistic culture movement in spaces that have rarely featured such perspectives. Complementary, as part of the College Autism Network (CAN) since 2017, under the leadership of Dr. Bradley E. Cox and Dr. Lee Burdette Williams, I have helped organize the annual College Autism Summit, which gathers practitioners, scholars, community members, and self-advocates, among other groups. Through CAN, and subsequently forming and facilitating the College Autism Network Virtual Association of Scholars (CANVAS), which boasts 450 members three years into its existence, I have visibly led an international movement that forefronts the vitality

of autistic culture in scholarly spaces. I have both observed autistic culture in play and, even if unintentionally, actually shaped it along the way. Autistic culture, in its ever-evolving and amorphous state, factors into the larger Neurodiversity movement.

Considering the multitude of theories and frames of knowledge that guide our understandings of disability and autism, in particular, leads me to embrace a theoretical framework that positions Neurodiversity Theory at the epicenter. As my research question centers on how autistic community college students navigate higher education, keeping this theory at the heart of my theoretical framework enables me to honor their rights, strengths, and perspectives throughout my research design. In the following chapters, I shed light on how I weave in Neurodiversity throughout research design, as well as how it manifested in the findings and implications. Within these chapters I also account for the roles of ableism, autistic studies, and autistic culture as informing participants' experiences. Finally, my broader knowledge of these spaces is informed by CDT, albeit of secondary nature, for its emphasis on disability more comprehensively does not account for the autism-related nuances associated with Neurodiversity Theory. In its totality my Neurodiversity-centered theoretical framework advances existent research by examining the evolution of disability scholarship to a point where we can forefront autistic perspectives and best uncover how these students traverse through community college.

#### **Chapter IV: Methodology**

Here I offer a roadmap of my methodology, which comprises a number of components that have allowed me to shape my research endeavor. I begin by establishing the epistemological perspectives that have guided my ways of thinking and, consequently, align with privileging the knowledge bases of autistic college students. From that point I recognize the key constructs that are threaded across the research. Within detailing the qualitative design for my dissertation I

thoroughly examine my selection of a case study as my particular qualitative approach. I also explain the study site and participants. The study's primary focus centers on autistic students' experiences, though following standards associated with case methods, I draw on other participant groups and sources of data. In covering data collection procedures, I share why I employed demographic surveys, interviews, written reflections, observations, and document analysis and what each of these strategies entailed. Later I address my data analysis procedures, which relied on descriptive, In Vivo, and emotion coding. Through sharing how Neurodiversity Theory informed data analysis and I reflected on this process, I illustrate a full-circle journey. Then I dive into the validity and reliability checks I employed to enhance the study's robustness. From there I share the list of relevant considerations that guided my research design: terminology, positionality and building student rapport, and ethical issues. Finally, I relay the study limitations.

### **Epistemological Perspectives**

This dissertation draws on a constructivist epistemology, embraced by case study researchers like Merriam (1998). With its emphasis on multiple realities existing based on individuals' backgrounds and experiences, constructivism emphasizes the researcher's role in interacting with participants to construct knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Merriam (1998) finds that, through constructivism, "reality is not an objective entity; rather, there are multiple interpretation of reality" (p. 22). I appreciate the premises associated with this paradigm, which finds value in the particulars of experiences and prioritizing participants' roles. For these reasons, I see constructivism as appropriate in my research design, in that it enables me to make sense of information alongside participants; essentially, I work to understand autistic people's

realities of the world. This approach perfectly fits within this Neurodiversity Theory-guided study that forefronts autistic individuals' unique perspectives.

Social constructivism represents a type of constructivism that, according to Doolittle and Camp (1999), differs from other types of constructivism that are more centered on cognition and coherent realities, but rather forefront the social nature of knowledge. Consequently, social constructivism relies on three main ideas: 1) “reality is constructed through human activity” [pp. 8]; 2) knowledge is based on social and cultural constructions where people develop meaning through interacting with other people and their environments; and 3) learning represents a social process (Kim, 2001). Researchers also remain self-aware enough that their personal experiences influence how they interpret both their own knowledge and how knowledge is constructed through their interactions with participants (Creswell, 2003). Consequently, researchers employing social constructivism cannot approach situations with complete objectivity, as this does not quite exist. Instead, social constructivism emphasizes the vitality of building knowledge together and drawing on distinct ways of perceiving the world.

Social constructivism as a paradigm embraces how disabled individuals construct knowledge over time, thus not solely reacting to how environments and non-disabled people set norms (Jones, 1996). This approach allows us to see knowledge as not only formed by society at large, but rather within the disabled individuals and how they make meaning through attaining new information and experiences.

I also selected social constructivism as fitting in how I approach my data analysis techniques, such as trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Additionally, this paradigm prioritizes ethics in how the researcher engages participants in the knowledge gaining and shaping process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As illustrated later, one tactic I utilized entailed

involving student participants in reviewing interpretations of transcripts, allowing us to co-construct knowledge in unison.

While minimal research on autism in higher education has directly incorporated an epistemological perspective, Ward and Webster (2018) employed social constructivism to illustrate how both they and participants shaped meaning. Similarly, I engaged in these strategies to demonstrate that my knowledge of students' journeys is influenced by both my interpretations and how they helped me re-envision my knowledge through them sharing feedback with me on such interpretations.

### **Key Constructs**

To participate in my study, students must have self-identified as autistic, representing one of the criteria of joining the community college autism transition program. Similarly, I operationalize a *community college autism transition program* as a formal program operated by staff members at a community college that serves enrolled autistic college students in their postsecondary education experiences; some may center on the role of students' transitions into and through college. The notion of *college autism transition program*, as I have defined this term throughout, more generally refers to similar programs directly offered by and within any type of postsecondary education institution. As my dissertation represents a qualitative study, I was interested in how autistic students navigated higher education, including various aspects of their lives related to academics, mental health, professional pursuits, and social experiences.

I draw on the terminology and conceptualization that the community college autism transition program uses, such as *social experiences* and *parental involvement*, to maintain fidelity and consistency. In describing autism, I rely on students explaining their own autistic identities; these may diverge from the DSM-5 depending on timing of diagnoses.

## **Qualitative Design**

Early on in the process of formulating my dissertation idea I determined that pursuing a qualitative design would best serve addressing my research question, which attends to the exploratory nature of qualitative research and case studies in particular (Yin, 1981). Given my qualitative proclivities in the types of inquiries I possess, this appeared to be a natural fit.

## ***Case Studies***

Case studies, which work to explain the *how* and *why* of a specific phenomenon (Yin, 1981), often examine singular, closed units of analysis that offer rich detail on the people, place, program, or policies, often from various vantage points (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Each unit may represent a case. I chose to follow Yin's (2017) case study traditions most strongly for many reasons, such as his structured, yet adaptive process for explaining how to curate and interpret data. His emphasis on addressing *how* and *why* questions is also closely aligned with my research question of how students enrolled in a college autism transition program navigate higher education. Perhaps most significantly, though, I value his extremely thorough and nuanced descriptions of the *design* aspect of engaging in case study research and how he approaches drawing on multiple sources of evidence as the bedrock.

That said, I also account for the contributions that Merriam (1998) brings to the case study design and are, in many ways, equally valuable to consider. For one, she acknowledged the flexibility of the research design and attending to sampling strategies. In this sense, I value how she prioritized flexibility where Yin falls short, a sentiment also shared by Yazan (2015). Furthermore, Merriam (1998) addressed essential strategies that qualitative researchers must employ during data collection, and I incorporate similarly detailed descriptions in outlining my own procedures. Yazan (2015) found that Yin and Merriam are complementary in many ways



and that combining their principles and procedures are beneficial. I agree and thus find ways of incorporating each of them into my research design and analytical processes.

I viewed framing my dissertation as a case study to be very appropriate for several reasons. For one, I bounded my investigation under a core context. In my study, the core context is the individual autistic student; the most relevant connected contexts, such as the institution more broadly and the college autism transition program, are secondary.

Additionally, I found merit in how heuristic case studies attend to the origins and issues associated with the main phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). In particular, it “is able to shed light on the phenomenon, allowing the reader to extend their experience, discover new meaning, or confirm what is known” (Brown, 2008, p. 3). In this dissertation, via explicating students’ journeys into and through community college, and all of the associated domains of their lives (e.g., academics, social, emotional), the phenomenon regarding how they navigate higher education becomes unraveled.

A single-case embedded design, concentrating on multiple units of analysis (Yin, 1998) and examining an issue from various vantage points, whether within, between, or across subunits (Baxter & Jack, 2008), best served my dissertation. Researchers may yield diverse, in-depth insights through drawing upon various pieces of evidence, from gathering documents and physical artifacts, to conducting interviews and direct observations (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 1998). By thoroughly describing the context as well, case study researchers provide a rich perspective of the many features that comprise a particular case (Yin, 1998). Consequently, case study researchers work to accomplish multiple objectives, and various scholars note a multitude of steps. These include determining the specific research questions (Dooley, 2002), identifying an

appropriate theory that guides the design and interpretation of the case (Yin, 1998), and selecting the sample (Merriam, 1998).

Five rationales are associated with engaging in single-case designs (Yin, 2013). First, critical cases aim to be connected to the main theories of interest. I played a pivotal role in determining if students align with the more agentic notions of neurodiversity or were still engaging in their autistic identity development. For instance, McWade et al. (2015) noted how neurodiversity suggests individuals “should reclaim and redefine ‘impairment,’ in the same way as the first disability rights activists challenged the meaning of ‘disability’” (p. 306). It is possible, however, that autistic student participants in the study may *not* have been seeking to change the impairment paradigm.

Second, cases should be extreme or unusual. As I will illustrate, the notion of examining autistic students’ experiences in a robust community college autism transition program is an anomaly, as my own search of long-running, extensive autism programs found them primarily concentrated at 4-year institutions. This makes my cases quite unusual.

Third, cases should be common. While this may seem counterintuitive given the aforementioned tenet of extreme/unusual, ultimately cases should have some regular elements. Indeed, there is a preponderance of autistic students enrolled in community colleges (Wei et al., 2014), making the case’s physical presence here to be expected.

Fourth, cases are meant to be revelatory. This principle holds that researchers should study a phenomenon that has long been inaccessible to social scientists. A mere handful of dissertations have been concentrated on community colleges and autism (e.g., Asmus, 2014; Berry, 2018; Carranza, 2017; Eckhardt, 2017; Torres, 2014), and only Carranza’s (2017) dissertation looked at a community college autism transition program. Among the qualities that

distinguishes my inquiry are the following: exploring a community college autism transition program as a primary focus; gathering insights from four distinct populations (autistic students, people students nominate as important, program staff, and college administrators); and employing five distinct types of methods to curate data.

Finally, the fifth rationale calls for engaging in longitudinal work. While my dissertation only encompassed collecting data over a several month period, it still tracked their pathways across multiple terms in college.

In particular, the single-case embedded case study approach – embodying a primary case, as well as several smaller units of analysis as part of the case – offers valuable insights into this study (Yin, 2017). Each student represents an individual case. Indeed, it was inevitable that participants’ descriptions of the programmatic impact varied between, within and across individual cases of autistic college students. Compiling this information, via a single-case embedded design, allowed me to understand the full scope of participants’ perspectives.

There are also direct connections to within-case sampling, which I employ and had ramifications in the eventual data collection and analytical processes. I find utility in within-case sampling, which centers on how information is nested within larger entities (Miles et al., 2019). As the researcher, I determine what information I am most interested in selecting and examining. Later I will discuss the particular pieces of data I collected.

### ***Study Site***

Upon embarking on this dissertation, I recognized I wanted to examine a community college autism transition program that met four important criteria. For one, I aimed to learn about a program that was robust in size and scale, serving more than just a small handful of autistic students. This would allow for obtaining richer perspectives than many studies that tend to

explore programs in their infancy (e.g., Hotez et al., 2018; White et al., 2017). Due to the number of programs that possess high fees (Barnhill, 2016), I aimed to identify a program that was either at a minimal cost to or free of charge to students. This factor further broadens the accessibility of program participation to students from traditionally minoritized backgrounds. Additionally, I hoped to concentrate the study within an institution that served a racially and economically diverse set of students more broadly, and featured this range of experiences and identities in the composition of program participants. Finally, I wanted to spotlight an autism program that belonged to an institution prioritizing and serving a high proportion of students with disabilities.

Though my initial search of community college autism transition programs yielded fewer than a dozen institutions (as ultimately illustrated in Nachman et al., 2021), upon reviewing these four factors, only a few institutions met the criteria. I identified Blue Moon Community College (BMCC) as the ideal site. To reference the expression of “once in a blue moon,” I selected this pseudonym to carry across the exceptionalism and rarity of such a positive, robust, and unique community college with a special autism program. The program’s pseudonym is called Captains of Autism in Community College (CACC). Rich background behind the uniqueness and salient elements of both BMCC and the CACC program are featured in the “College Context” and “Program Context” sections of the findings.

### ***Participants***

This study draws upon participants from four groups. I determined that enlisting a variety of perspectives best addressed my research question to understand how autistic community college students enrolled in a college-based autism transition program navigate higher education.

Participant groups and methods are featured in Table 3. The first group included 13 autistic community college students participating in CACC, and these individuals’ perspectives

and participation were essential to the research project given the study's focus on autistic students.<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth, CACC's director, assisted with the recruitment process by sending out emails to CACC program participants at least 18 years of age. This demographic survey, detailed later, also prompted students to share demographic information.

The second group entailed nine participants considered as important to autistic students' college lives. I enlisted these individuals after students listed their names and contact information in the initial demographic surveys. This nomination process, akin to what Ward and Webster (2018) instituted, allowed the autistic student to have agency in nominating individuals who could provide further context of their experiences. Between the first and second interviews with autistic students, I engaged in interviews with these recommended individuals. They represented the second primary group of interviewees.

The third group comprised CACC program staff – two full-time personnel, one of whom has been with CACC since its inception nearly one decade ago, as well as two part-time staff members – at the onset of data collection. I engaged in this procedure to glean the most foundational program context from the individuals who know it best. This knowledge guided my understandings of program perspectives from students further in the process.

The final group involved nine BMCC college staff (including administrators, staff, and instructors) who have familiarity with or are engaged in the CACC program. Elizabeth virtually connected me with 12 BMCC college staff prior to my visit, and I was able to interview nine of them while at the site.

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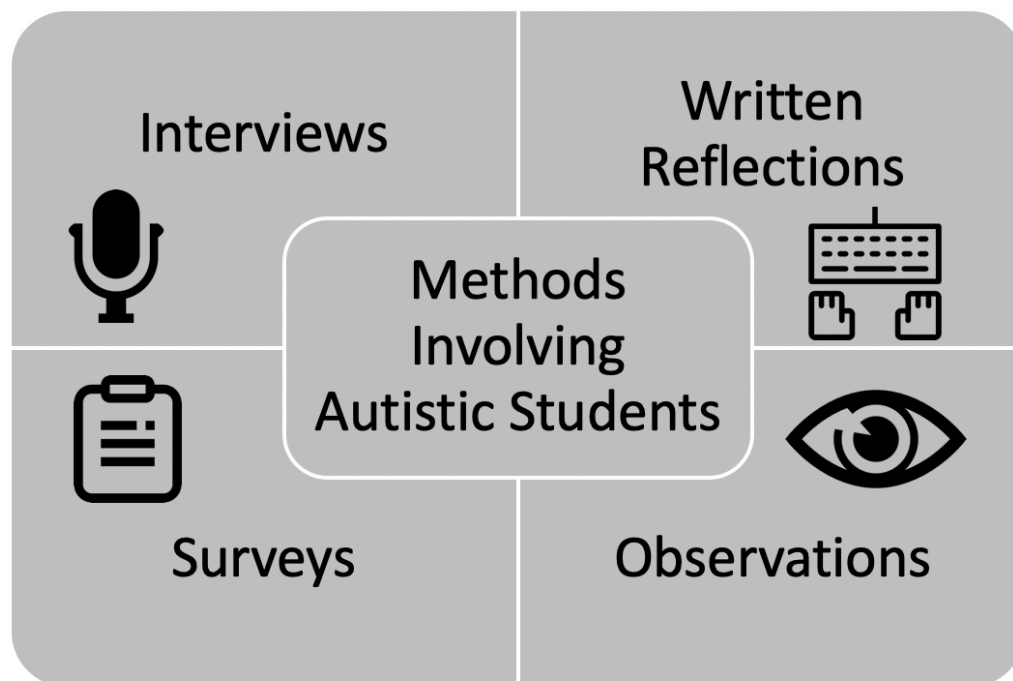
<sup>4</sup> The study featured 22 autistic students who completed the initial survey, though 13 ultimately engaged in other components.

## **Data Collection**

As Yin (1998) illustrated that case study researchers typically gather a combination of sources of data – among them documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts – I found great merit in utilizing many of these tools in different ways. Here I detail the procedures behind collecting five types of data: demographic surveys, interviews, observations, written reflections, and documents. I engaged in four methods with autistic student participants; see Figure 1.

### ***Demographic Surveys***

Data collection, as it pertains to involving autistic students, commenced with CACC program staff distributing a Qualtrics-based demographic survey that I designed to all autistic CACC program students. They disseminated the demographic survey via email on at least occasions between November 2019 and February 2020. I was also virtually invited to Skype in with one of CACC's courses in January 2020 to discuss the study, encourage students to fill out the demographic survey, and address any questions they had. These approaches aimed to maximize the yield of study participation and reinforce to students of my interest in learning from them.

**Figure 1***Methods Involving Autistic Students*

The demographic survey outlined the responsibilities involved for study participation and featured 22 questions across three categories: identities, autism and disabilities, and educational experiences. These questions provided me, as the researcher, with an initial understanding of these students' demographic information and college experiences. Students were offered the chance to consent to just survey participation and also to be contacted for interviews. I also provided a space for students to input the names of two or more individuals in their lives who they would like to nominate to be interviewed, based on being impactful in their college experiences. Some students avoided sharing the names and contact info of people they would nominate, out of concerns of sharing their information, and provided me with details upon

interviewing them. I enlisted both my advisor and CACC program staff to review the demographic survey and make amendments to question framing, organization, and content.

Twenty-two students completed the demographic survey, though five did not list their personal information and thus could not be recruited for interviews, and one student filled out the demographic survey once I had completed interviews. Consequently, I enlisted 16 student participants from the demographic survey for interview participation, and 13 engaged in interviews. All students were informed that they would receive a \$25 Amazon gift card after the first interview and observation and another \$25 Amazon gift card upon completing written reflections and the second interview, as tokens of my appreciation.

### *Interviews*

As semi-structured interviews comprised the main source of data and possess the greatest complexity, I dive into this in the most depth. I detail these in a chronological format, starting with the CACC program staff, followed by the autistic students in CACC, people the students nominate, and BMCC college staff.

**CACC Program Staff.** First, I conducted the first set of interviews with each of the two full-time CACC program staff as the first form of data collection in October 2019. Prior to my campus visit I conducted five Skype interviews (three with one staff member, two with the other), whereas during my visit I interviewed each in person once; following my campus visit, I once again interviewed one staff member again. These interviews lasted anywhere from 68-100 minutes. Questions centered on the program's development, changes, curriculum, challenges and opportunities, their connections to autistic college students, and their roles in shaping programming. Later, during my site visit, I interviewed each of the part-time CACC program



staff – current or recent undergraduate students who work in the office and serve as peer mentors – on one occasion. These interviews ranged from 50-55 minutes.

**Autistic Students.** Second, I engaged in narrative interviews with autistic student participants, the primary group of individuals who comprise the main source of data. As their perspectives are at the epicenter of the dissertation research, I allocate the most space and time toward explaining this process. Narrative interviews consist of two phases: the narration phase allows the interviewee to share all experiences via narrative thinking and without interruptions, with the interviewer serving as an active listener and observer; the conversation phase permits the interviewer to ask for clarification, adds some new topics of interest, and encourages elaboration (Kim, 2015). I conducted semi-structured interviews with autistic students across two points in time (utilizing the aforementioned phases, with the conversation phase being especially prominent in the second interview). The first interview took place during my site visit in February 2020, though some unfolded virtually. Interview topics included the following topics: college choice, childhood experiences and family, identities, and the CACC program. In total I conducted the initial round of interviews with 13 autistic students, with interviews ranging from 48-103 minutes long, averaging 69 minutes.

Meanwhile, the second interview addressed topics regarding academics, relationship, campus life, professional goals, health, identity disclosure, and the CACC program in more depth. As I was unable to return to the site in May 2020, as I had envisioned, due to the Coronavirus outbreak, I conducted these interviews virtually. Ten out of the original 13 (77%) students engaged in follow-up interviews, which ranged from 59-109 minutes, averaging 86 minutes.

My initial intention was to enlist seven autistic college student participants for interviews. I landed upon this number following reviewing other qualitative studies that featured smaller samples (e.g., Bell et al., 2017; Cox et al., 2017; Van Hees et al., 2018). However, based on the high level of interest in interview participation among students who completed the demographic survey, I increased my number. I also believed having a higher number of students interviewed during the first round would bolster my yield for the second interview, which ended up proving fruitful.

**People Students Nominated.** Third, I conducted interviews with people that autistic students nominated as particularly important in shaping their college experiences. As autistic students possessed freedom in electing most anyone, I have shaped my interview protocols to be designed to work for particular groups of individuals (parents, relatives, friends, faculty, campus staff, as well as one “other person” protocol that could cover anyone who did not meet the criteria for any of the aforementioned categories). Each of these protocols sought to understand that individual’s connection to and interpretations of the autistic college student’s journey, as well as gather particular pieces of knowledge based on the type of relationship they held.

Students could nominate *two or more* individuals, thus supplying me with options of who I could contact. The demographic survey indicated a spot for students to list their names and contact information. Due to some people students nominate not living in close physical proximity to the BMCC campus, I provided these individuals with choices behind how we staged the interviews (either in person or via Skype); all but one took place via Skype.

Since I nearly doubled my envisioned number of autistic student participants for interviews, I decided to enlist only one – not two – of the individuals that each student nominated for interviews. I recruited each student’s top choice for the nominated person and, if after

multiple attempts in making contact failed, I enlisted their second choice. I reached out to nominated people following each of the 13 students' initial interviews, in order to base interview questions on context and the student's relationship to them. Ultimately, I interviewed nine people who students nominated (two of the students nominated Elizabeth, who was interviewed twice in this context), accounting for 10/13 students also having a nominated person talk about them.

**BMCC College Staff.** Fourth, I relied on Elizabeth to provide recommendations of BMCC college staff who have a working relationship with, or knowledge of, the CACC program. Involving these individuals ensured that I had a broader sense of the college landscape and how CACC fits into, or diverges from, institutional priorities. This process worked toward becoming familiarized with the college climate and attitudes of autism, thus affording rich contextualization and even some counterpoints to the main narratives I gleaned from interviewees most attached to CACC.

### *Written Reflections*

I found great value in obtaining written reflections from autistic student interviewees. Ward and Webster (2018) determined that implementing written reflections “allowed students to note their thoughts as experiences occurred, rather than having to remember them at interviews” (p. 6). Written reflections are also helpful in providing students with more time, space, and contemplation in framing their thoughts outside of the interview format.

Following the first interview, I provided each student with a template in a Word document to fill out, asking them to address six or more prompts, at their convenience, during the time leading up to the second interview (approximately two months after the initial interview). Students could select two or more prompts from three categories: personal

development, health and interests; academics and career; and social experiences. Each category featured six prompts, thus giving students the choice to answer up to 18 prompts.

Ten of the original 13 autistic student participants from the first interview completed written reflections. Some engaged in the bare minimum of responses to questions, providing brief sentences, whereas others filled out each of the 18 questions with lengthier content.

### ***Observations***

During my initial communication with autistic students, I asked them how and where I could observe them during a campus meeting or experience at the time of my site visit. The intention behind engaging in observations of their time on campus – for instance, during a meeting with one of their CACC program peer mentors – was to watch how they interacted with other individuals in particular situations. Observing students in these informal places on campus would also provide richer insights into the college environment. Nine students selected peer mentor meetings for their observation, and one of these took place virtually via Skype, since it unfolded beyond my site visit. One observation took place between a student and her supervisor on campus. In-person observations lasted from 15-40 minutes long. During each of these observations I took field notes, jotting down striking participant quotes, nonverbal communication, topics of conversation, speed and pacing of dialogues, and other salient factors associated with these interactions. Field notes enabled me to record both nonverbal elements and nuances associated with verbal components. The three remaining observations required creativity, since I could not observe these students on campus during my site visit. Therefore, we developed alternative approaches: two shared a set of email exchanges with their peer mentors (since they do not physically meet with them), and another provided a set of text message exchanges with her best friend.

### ***Documentation***

Two sources of documentation lent further context on the creation and management the CACC program. First, I drew from internal documents about the CACC program that program staff shared with me. I specifically asked them to relay materials that guided curriculum development and programmatic operations, and they shared with me peer mentor agendas (for both mentors and students) for all weeks during the term, as well as several examples of CACC course syllabi. Second, I analyzed publicly accessible information about both the CACC program and the BMCC college via website content. These tactics included reviewing every page on the CACC program website, all articles and press releases about autism on the BMCC campus, and BMCC college reports. Akin to observations, documentation worked to address my research question and served as a secondary set of methods that worked toward triangulation. In essence, documents could illuminate distinctions or similarities between what participants shared in other spaces. Given that most of these documents were shared with me via digital means, I obtained and analyzed most of the data prior to my site visit.

### **Data Analysis**

I approached data analysis with the understanding that I am interpreting many pieces of data through a variety of lenses (e.g., autistic person, community college researcher) and various frames of knowledge (e.g., social constructivism, prioritizing neurodivergent perspectives, etc.). It was of the utmost importance that I customized my analytical strategies to not only the type of data, but also based on what techniques may best capture the meaning of the experience (Table 4).

For one, following Robert Yin's (2013) approaches to case study quality control checks, I similarly placed a strong emphasis on engaging in these strategies during the analysis process.

Yin also calls for structure and consistency with case study research, which I aimed to demonstrate in the organization and routines I established in analyzing each piece of similar data (e.g., all interviews) in a parallel format. Meanwhile, Merriam's (1998) approaches to case studies came through viewing data analysis in a more flexible manner. Most importantly, she interpreted data analysis as unfolding in conjunction with data collection in a cyclical fashion. As exhibited, my research existed in an iterative state, with analysis during one phase of data informing how I later engaged with another set of data down the line. For instance, I renamed some codes during the second phase of the study.

I utilized the NVivo qualitative data analysis software, as it helped me organize and interpret the bevy of data I curated. Although I used this software, it did not analyze the data for me, but rather served as a mechanism for assisting me in analyzing the data (Azeem et al., 2012). NVivo features the opportunity for me to assign nodes, or codes, to particular pieces of text. This process proved useful as identified potential categories and themes.

### ***Coding Procedures***

For my first cycle of coding of solely qualitative data (everything except for the demographic survey), I drew on two types of elemental methods (descriptive coding and In Vivo coding) and one type of affective method (emotion coding) to provide well-rounded and complementary perspectives of participants (Saldaña, 2016). Meanwhile, second cycle methods employed axial coding. Descriptive analysis also entered the picture with the demographic survey component (de Vaus, 2013). I will explain how these aforementioned coding strategies fit into the five types of data collection techniques I employed: demographic surveys, interviews, written reflections, observations, and documents.

**Demographic Surveys.** Capturing quantitative information (e.g., students' current ages, age of diagnosis, GPA) and descriptive information (e.g., parental education attained, goals, gender identity), the demographic survey served as a foundational piece of information that lent general context regarding the students who participated. Descriptive analysis is most fitting for interpreting demographic survey information, as it “deals with questions of what things are like, not why they are that way” (de Vaus, 2013, p. 22). In this way, the demographic survey was more secondary to the other pieces of data I collected, but helped establish the backgrounds of the autistic students at the centerpiece of this dissertation. I employed descriptive statistics of the demographic survey information via Qualtrics upon closing the demographic survey (prior to interviewing students). I incorporate visuals into the tables to impart context on the specific students whose stories are highlighted in the most depth (across interviews, observations, and written reflections, too), as opposed to students who solely partook in demographic surveys.

**Interviews.** When analyzing interviews, I drew on several coding strategies. First, I felt that descriptive coding was an appropriate foundation, as I reviewed data and aimed to understand the *what* behind participants' words; in essence, to identify the topic at hand (Saldaña, 2016). Words have meaning, and being able to summarize the main content via descriptive coding helped elucidate some of the richer, more nuanced interpretation associated with my other coding approaches. Descriptive coding, useful in studies drawing upon many types of data, also built an inventory of terms that assist with further analysis (Miles et al., 2019).

Second, In Vivo coding, commonly used in studies where participants' voices are of the highest priority, draws on the exact words that they use for assigning codes (Saldaña, 2016). I aimed to honor what participants meant, especially important for autistic students whose perspectives are not always highlighted, and this works to translate their phrases and framing

most explicitly. That said, I did not rely on this coding approach too frequently, as such dependence can sometimes undermine emergent researchers (Saldaña, 2016).

Third, I applied emotion coding, which works to give context to the feeling and emotion of what is said (Saldaña, 2016). “Since emotions are a universal human experience, our acknowledgement of them in our research provides deep insight into the participants’ perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 125). Emotion coding was pragmatic for this dissertation that examines relationships across different types of participants (Miles et al., 2019).

Fourth, I used narrative analysis, allowing me to pull in the trademark elements of narrative thinking (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986) and restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) to relay and make sense of participants’ experiences. While this process does not entail a particular coding scheme per se, through utilizing narrative analysis, my construction and re-construction of participant stories enabled these anecdotes to come to life, primarily through the vignettes that show each student’s background.

Narrative thinking entails three steps: recognizing the role of narrative schema, or how storytellers construct stories based on asking themselves what happened in their lives, predicated on the information they have available; drawing on prior knowledge and experience in guiding understanding; and incorporating cognitive strategies entails rearranging and choosing past knowledge and experiences to influence interpretations of how stories are designed (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986). Narrative thinking guided an iterative and reflective approach that both privileged the storytellers’ content and places it in context with what is known about the topic more generally. Ultimately, I aimed to achieve narrative meaning, which, according to Polkinghorne (1988), as cited in Kim (2015), works toward understanding how individuals’ stories and



cultures have unique meanings. Upon coding participants' individual experiences, I united theory, literature, and knowledge about the phenomenon, offering my own interpretations (Kim, 2015).

Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) three analytical tools proved especially useful in the restorying process. First, broadening involves generalizing about an individual's life or a climate to get a sense of the story's context. This is where situating autistic students' experiences, in relation to how important individuals in their lives make sense of those experiences, was particularly useful. For CACC program staff and BMCC college staff, I similarly asked about their lives and work, which helped to understand the spaces they occupy and the stories that have shaped their lives.

Second, burrowing looks at the finer details within the data, such as the event's emotional and moral qualities (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As I reviewed transcripts during the data analysis process, for instance, I incorporated emotion coding to note how participants described their feelings about situations, or even exhibited feelings during the interview process (Saldaña, 2016).

Third, storying involves putting together the pieces to reconstruct an experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). "The person returns to present and future considerations and asks what the meaning of the event is and how he or she might create a new story of self which changes the meaning of the event, its description, and its significance for the larger life story the person may be trying to live" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 11). Here I intertwined as much information as possible – across interview transcripts, observations, documents, and written reflections – to construct an accurate and well-rounded depiction of participants' connections to the CACC program. For autistic student participants, in particular, I unveiled how they have

navigated postsecondary education as neurodivergent individuals. This storying process also lent fuller context of these autistic students' lives by uniting data gleaned from the people they nominated. Utilizing this approach is also in alignment with how Clandinin (2013) described data analysis as moving across different types of texts, from being out in the field and capturing field texts, to making sense of interim research texts (Clandinin, 2013). Nevertheless, I recognized that I will never reach one exhaustive version of a story due to retelling and reliving over time; meanings are constructed from how participants understand their stories at a present time (Clandinin, 2013).

Narrative analysis proved viable in developing students' stories from their earliest years to their time in college today, as illustrated in the form of vignettes later in the dissertation and extending to how I conceptualized their experiences in the main findings. This process also enabled me to produce initial codes that eventually led toward axial coding. I also valued narrative analysis for its utility in complementing my social constructivist stance of co-creating knowledge of students' experiences; only through hearing their full stories could I foster a more robust sense of meaning making.

Finally, during the second round of coding, upon establishing all of my initial codes through the open coding process, I engaged in axial coding. Through chunking codes together to form categories, I possessed a better understanding of the general landscape (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Saldaña (2016) aptly equates axial coding as involving the main category at the center of the wheel, presumably with the smaller groups of codes as the spokes. In this sense, axial coding was fruitful in sorting through data and starting to form categories.

**Written Reflections.** Not unlike interviews, written reflections possessed all of the aforesaid coding strategies. As a reminder, written reflections are only composed by student

participants, making this more targeted. Linking how I interpret students' interviews with their written reflections, and accounting for how students deconstruct their own experiences and interpretations via this introspective experience, was useful in showing their full stories.

**Observations.** While observations contained descriptive, In Vivo, emotion, and axial coding, as these were all applicable strategies, I excluded narrative analysis. I determined this strategy would not best fit with interpreting brief situations featuring student participants where they had no active role in sharing their perspectives of the stories they were engaging in.

**Documentation.** In analyzing documents, I engaged in descriptive coding and axial coding. In Vivo coding applied when I could obtain private documents and pull out a few compelling quotes that illustrated a striking point. I refrained from In Vivo coding with publicly accessible information (such as website content) as maintaining the exact verbiage would increase the odds of exposing the institutional identity.

### ***Role of Theory in Guiding Data Analysis***

Yin (2013) offered one strategy for researchers to consider drawing upon in analyzing the data: relying on theoretical propositions. Across different types of data (interviews, documents) and within individual pieces of data (e.g., an observation of a meeting; a set of written reflections one student shared with me), I accounted for Neurodiversity in my coding process by employing a few strategies. To honor students' descriptions of experiences for instance, as earlier mentioned, I engaged in In Vivo coding and emotion coding to capture how students felt about particular experiences (e.g., interacting with instructors, starting college, attending events). Furthermore, I examined how autistic students viewed themselves in concert with, or in opposition to, perceptions held by other people in their lives. Such codes related to concepts like deficit-based views of disability and advocacy. My understandings of ableism, inherent in

existent theoretical perspectives, factored into creating precise codes that illustrated cases of structural ableism versus internalized ableism.

### ***Inductive and Deductive Approaches***

Throughout data analysis, I utilized both deductive and inductive approaches. On the deductive front, before analyzing data, I identified a number of terms that I envisioned would appear through the findings, many of these deriving from Neurodiversity Theory (e.g., “strengths,” “advocacy”). Other codes I identified prior to data collection related to CACC’s framework and design. I created a code for each of the courses, tenets (e.g., “social justice”), and main pieces of programming (e.g., “peer mentors,” “orientation”). Additionally, I developed codes that pertained to various key stakeholders in students’ lives, such as their parents, faculty members, and friends. This enabled me to later figure out to what extent particular figures factored into their college experiences. Another key area where I engaged in deductive coding unfolded when I envisioned common autism-related characteristics that would surface during data collection (e.g., “hypersensitivity,” “lack of focus,” “routinized”). These prescribed codes allowed me to more simply pinpoint particular attributes, people, and experiences that would materialize. I drew on articles regarding autism in higher education to inform this deductive process.

Despite my preconceived notions of codes that I expected would appear upon reviewing the data, I aimed to ensure that the process also be inductive in nature. Upon coding each piece of data, I developed original codes situated within some of the pre-established categories, such as “autism-related characteristics,” and created other categories along the way. As earlier mentioned, axial coding enabled me to situate and re-situate emergent categories that I identified in an iterative fashion.

### ***General Analysis Reflections***

The data analysis process allowed me to tie back to my research question of understanding how autistic community college students enrolled in a college-based autism transition program navigate higher education. Capturing their stories and making sense of how they constructed their identities and experiences within both the CACC programmatic context, and at BMCC more generally, offered a window into their world. However, my interpretation of their descriptions, both via interview transcripts and written reflections featuring autistic students, provided one lens, hence why the other methods (interviews with people who students nominate, documents, observations) were necessary to include in tandem. Collectively, these methods and other techniques, including extensive use of memoing, enabled me with ample space to address my research question.

### ***Validity and Reliability***

Morse et al. (2012) argue the vitality of employing various techniques to guarantee accuracy. “In qualitative research, verification refers to the mechanisms used during the process of research to incrementally contribute to ensuring reliability and validity and, thus, the rigor of a study” (Morse et al., 2002, p. 17).

**Validity Techniques.** To enhance the validity of the study, I engaged in three techniques illustrated by Maxwell (1992) that guide much qualitative research, as well as other strategies noted in research design literature. First, to address descriptive validity, or factual accuracy, I worked to preserve the authenticity of what participants shared (Maxwell, 1992). I accomplished this through many tasks, such as verifying the completeness and exactness of interview transcripts in relation to recordings and field notes. Second, interpretive validity relates to the meanings that participants attach to objects, events, and behaviors. To ensure this, I acted with

mindfulness regarding the terms I used to describe participants' emotions, actions, and expressions (Maxwell, 1992), both in the way I used language in protocols and demographic surveys, and also in my interpretation of individuals' experiences and descriptions during the coding process. I engaged in emotion coding and In Vivo coding to authentically preserve how participants expressed themselves. Third, evaluative validity relates to "whether the researcher is able to describe and understand data without being evaluative or judgmental" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 191). Maxwell (1992) explains that researchers must refrain from putting their own perspective on top of participants. Beyond disclosing my common autism and community college affiliations with participants, I avoided inserting my own life experiences and personal interpretations within the presentation of findings. Instead, I limited those viewpoints to a researcher memo (see Appendix A) that situated my identities and experiences in conducting the study.

**Participant Validation.** I accomplished participant validation through employing various tactics. For one, engaging in member checking with student participants following data collection – through sending back my interpretations of students interviews and allowing them to provide corroboration or modification – served as one form of verification regarding capturing their precise meaning. Adopting this strategy also boosted internal validity, or credibility (Yin, 2013). As illustrated earlier when describing member checking, 10/13 students reviewed Interview 1 interpretations and 10/10 students reviewed Interview 2 interpretations. This response rate, as well as students' tendencies to elaborate on points they had earlier discussed, was remarkable in illustrating their continued study engagement. In this case study I gathered all context possible about the case; therefore, employing thick description, as a type of validity, is inherent in the research design that I have presented (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

**Construct Validity.** I also accounted for construct validity, though this type of validity is often difficult to execute in case study research due to the lack of operationalization of terms and measures (Yin, 2013). In my study, there are a number of concepts – among them, *community college autism transition program*, *autistic*, *program staff*, *self-advocacy*, and *ableism*. Indeed, I have defined these terms based on how existent studies have employed similar jargon.

To boost construct validity, I both gathered feedback from both my advisor and CACC program staff regarding terms and interview protocol questions, as well as enlisted three autistic graduate student peers across three universities to pilot the interview questions and offer input. These individuals shared valuable insights toward making interview questions clearer, more precise, and presented in a more logical order.

**External Validity.** External validity works to build generalizability, and while this is neither always possible nor expected in qualitative research where one situation can represent a topic more generally, Yin (2017) recommended using theory in single-case studies to help build analytical generalization. In essence, the case study provides greater context to theoretical concepts. Through confirming or advancing theory, and perhaps even building new concepts, case study researchers aim to reach analytical generalization. Yin (2017) noted that, “regardless of whether the generalization was derived from the conditions you specified at the outset or uncovered at the conclusion of your case study, the generalization will be at a conceptual level higher than that of the specific case” (p. 38).

For my case study, I determined how, through incorporating Neurodiversity Theory, I bring new perspective to students’ experiences via situating them within a community college autism transition program setting. Employing Neurodiversity Theory also has broader utility beyond the hallowed spaces of academia. In fact, adopting this framework across society

showcases the possibilities of how autistic people process information and contribute to our world, no matter the setting or circumstance. Within the community college autism transition program, though, the salience of Neurodiversity becomes acutely salient, almost meta with instances of programmatic staff directly using this term and discussing the movement. I recognize, of course, that the population, priorities, and pressing issues that face BMCC as an institution and CACC as a program may not translate to all other academic settings. Yet high transferability exists, as the challenges that BMCC faces regarding campus climate issues and siloed walls – and even its diverse student demographic profile – mirror community colleges across the country. Similarly, despite CACC’s higher student population and greater longevity than most comparable college autism transition programs, its programming reflects what one might find at any other autism program (whether located at a community college or a 4-year institution). In this sense, both the broader institution and specific program are in many ways representative of their counterparts.

Ravitch and Carl (2016) compile many forms of triangulation in their book. For one, triangulation exists on many fronts and entails gathering various sources and tools to offer competing and complete interpretations. Methodological triangulation was achieved through engaging in various methods that best suited the particular data, whereas data triangulation unfolded through utilizing an assortment of data sources. This was illustrated through my intentionality in employing particular types of data collection to capture the most important insights I needed. For instance, written reflections from autistic students complemented the knowledge that these participants shared via interviews, attended to their varying ways of processing information, and offered another platform for obtaining useful information.



**Reliability.** Golafshani (2003) notes how many qualitative researchers feel that reliability is not central to qualitative research, but that it can still be addressed via examining the trustworthiness of data analysis. At its core, studies work toward reliability through researchers creating case study databases that contain all of the raw data (Yin, 2013). These include notes associated with the various methods employed, documentation, and tabular materials such as demographic surveys (Yin, 2013). Appendix B illustrates my recruitment letter to students, whereas Appendix C demonstrates the initial demographic survey I disseminated to students; materials are slightly edited to honor institutional and programmatic anonymity.

Furthermore, in ensuring that my study was scrupulous, I aligned with the four main concepts for assessing rigor that Ravitch and Carl (2016) noted. First, credibility accounts for the internal validity of the researcher's measurement tools. As mentioned, through utilizing member checking, offering thick description and having fellow autistic students review and offer edits to interview protocols, these approaches enhanced credibility. An example of a student interview protocol can be found in Appendix D.

Second, transferability relates to how applicable particular insights of the study may work for other cases, albeit still ensuring the contextual nature of the specific case. Via offering much detail about the data and context, researchers provide fellow scholars with opportunities to “transfer aspects of a study design and findings by taking into consideration different contextual factors...” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 189). Though the research design that I laid out may require fellow scholars to modify them to meet their particular needs, the aim is for there to be transferability in translating the method to other contexts.

Third, dependability ensures consistency of rationale for how and why data is used. By explaining the purpose behind implementing methods in specific ways and orders, as I have demonstrated, researchers can achieve dependability.

Fourth, confirmability is akin to objectivity via researchers sharing their biases and positionality. Importantly, I was transparent about my own association with the community (as a community college alum who has Asperger's) so they understood my motivations. While it is unreasonable to assume that I could be completely objective, I have transparently shared my perspectives and predispositions with both participants and readers.

### ***Relevant Considerations***

Here I highlight the various factors I have come to reflect on in both designing the study and interpreting the data. Recognizing the terminology I use, positionality I possess, ethical choices I have engaged in, and validity and reliability issues I have worked to enhance.

**Terminology.** I continue to draw upon how the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) defines autism, which includes the following diagnoses: autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified. That said, I avoided medical-based language and framing as much as possible. Also, while "college students with autism" is commonly used in the discourse, I used identity-first language to be more equitable and de-stigmatize the disability (Gernsbacher, 2017). I also reinforced that autistic students have agency, and through depicting this as a primary identity, they take charge over their experiences; autism is not afflicted on them, per what the notion of "with autism" seems to suggest.

**Positionality and Building Participant Rapport.** This topic is vitally important to me on multiple fronts. First, as someone who primarily researches autism and community colleges –

sometimes focused on these intersections – this continued research agenda on autistic community college students builds my content expertise in this unique specialty. Future projects stemming from this study may represent among the most comprehensive pieces of research developed to capture autistic community college students’ perspectives. Consequently, my future research agenda will advance the current work I have conducted to date that provides depictions of autism from the vantage points of institutions more broadly, prior research literature, and future faculty members.

Second, as a white man, I recognized how my privileged identities shaped my dynamics with participants, particularly with individuals who may not share these same identities and thus felt more vulnerable in my presence. While my racial and gender identities, at times at odds with those of my participants, did not explicitly shape rapport, it is possible that these implicitly influenced the content they shared. Similarly, I understood that I existed in a position of power as an “outsider” coming into the community college and who is further in his educational journey (as a doctoral candidate) than the student participants, and perhaps other participants, too. I adopted the aforementioned techniques of allowing participants to ask me questions about my interests in this research and provided them with initiative in discussing topics to hopefully assuage certain concerns. Most participants had few questions of me, and expressed interest and value in this line of research.

That said, I understand that my mere presence, even with the cautious and thoughtful measures I noted, may have still produced implicit discomfort. I acknowledged to participants that my minoritized identity as a person with Asperger’s – part of the autism umbrella – who prioritizes authentic autism research to demonstrate my commitment to the topic. Additionally, I shared that I am a community college graduate, though I did not sense that this affiliation

mattered as much as the autism component. My autistic and community college graduate identities and experiences are close to me personally and professionally, and thus shape the momentum for my work.

Third, as an emerging scholar who wants to see change unfold at community colleges, I recognize that practitioners will only find recommendations to be relevant and pragmatic to implement if presented to them in clear and accessible ways. I will be providing the CACC program staff with a summary of my interpretations of the program and the study's findings for them to use as a resource beyond my dissertation.

**Ethical Considerations.** I engaged in several strategies with my participants to be transparent about the aims of this research endeavor. From the onset, I informed autistic students on the consent form that they did not need to answer any questions that made them feel anxious, uncomfortable or distressed. No participants asked that we skip a question, though there were instances of them not remembering or knowing answers to questions, which could have signaled discomfort. To alleviate any potential stressors that have may come from the interview process, I provided student participants with the interview protocol in advance to review the content and determine what they wanted to share and/or discuss. Sharing the consent form in advance also informed participants about the length of each study component, so they were aware of expectations and had opportunities to take breaks. No student participants sought breaks, however. One student participant (Andrew) wrote out answers to interview questions, bringing them to the interview, though he did not read responses aloud, save for a few instances.

Since autistic college students' perspectives have long been silenced, or not heard, these techniques afforded them time and space to share their stories and engage in restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Though sometimes stories are retold in different manners than

originally shared, through asking clarifying questions, I reached toward a clearer meaning of events that marked the individual participant's life (Riessman, 1993).

I maintained the privacy of participants through the following measures. First, participants self-assigned pseudonyms to themselves. A few did not, and I assigned pseudonyms to them. Second, I conducted in-person interviews in locations of participants' choosing to ensure that they feel most comfortable and protected. For participants who elected to engage in Skype interviews, I conduct these in a private room on my end.

In terms of confidentiality, interviews featuring students, as well as the individuals they nominate, were linked together through numerical identifiers. Similarly, student demographic surveys and observational notes of students were converted to the same numerical identifiers to connect them. I transcribed some interviews myself, whereas for others I used temi.com, a reputable service that has been used by fellow UW-Madison colleagues working on their dissertations. Upon receiving these transcribed interviews, I immediately stored them on encrypted UW-Madison servers via UW-Madison Box, where I kept all other electronic data procured in this study. Most significantly, I was be the only individual handling and viewing data, outside of the aforementioned automated transcription service. All procedures were approved by the University of Wisconsin-Madison IRB under protocol number 2019-0969.

### ***Limitations***

I identified eight primary limitations as inhibiting the study. The first four are related to participants, whereas the latter four are connected to the methodology.

First and foremost, any autistic community college students who participated do not necessarily represent the "norm," as many autistic students do not formally register with disability services, lest have access to an autism-specific program at their college or university.

Thus, individuals who participated represent a subset of the autistic college student population who are not only comfortable enough talking about their autistic identities to support offices and programs at their college, but also with a researcher like myself. Along these lines, I recognized that autistic students' willingness to participate stemmed from the trust that they have placed in the autism program and desire to share their stories. Furthermore, their comfort in participating may also have been based on if they have had any negative past experiences with people in positions of power, whether for medical, psychological, or academic purposes. As illustrated earlier, my transparency and own membership in the autism community may have assuaged some students' trepidation. While there was a possibility of self-selection bias and self-favorability bias coming into play, I recognized from the onset that these autistic community college students may have been exceptional cases.

Second, I viewed student participant attrition as limiting consistent engagement across different phases of the study. Since some student participants completed the demographic survey three months before I held interviews, this may have inhibited students from remaining interested in engaging in subsequent stages of the study. That said, I had a yield of 81% (13/16) of student participants from demographic surveys to interviews. I had concerns about further attrition from Phase 1 (involving Interview 1 and the observation), to Phase 2 (roughly two months later with the completion of written reflections and Interview 2). I situated interviews during periods of the term when finals were not impending (or recent) to reduce the likelihood of this type of stress in preventing participation. The benefit of splitting interviews across a few months entailed tracking changes in the students' experiences over the academic year, building trust and familiarity, and generating additional context on their lives from people they nominated. Ultimately, 77% (10/13) of student participants engaged in Phase 2.

Third, students may have felt reticent in discussing particularly sensitive topics, whether it be about their own identities, or from the standpoint that they knew other people they nominated would be interviewed to talk about them. While I could not force students to discuss the main topics illustrated on the interview protocols, I was confident that my interviewing style, autistic identity, and framing of the study eased any potential discomfort. I also viewed written reflections as another outlet for them to translate thoughts they may not otherwise want to share aloud. In the end, students talked about personal challenges, including suicidality, depression, and emotional abuse, though at times said “I don’t remember” or “I don’t know” when asked questions they perhaps did not want to answer. It is worth noting, however, that these responses emerged with both sensitive and standard questions.

Fourth, one common flaw among previous studies harkens back to self-favorability bias among non-student participants (Dallas et al., 2018; Nevill & White, 2011). I anticipated that people students nominated would want to portray autism, and the autistic individuals they know, in a manner that was more elevating and positive due to being directly enlisted and knowing that their stories would be directly linked to autistic students in the final dissertation. For CACC program staff, I was aware that they may not have wanted to disclose mistakes they have made in their roles or particularly negative experiences with colleagues, students or parents. Here is where the power of triangulation comes in through comparing what they relayed with other pieces of data (interviews with other participants and document analysis). Among BMCC college staff, I realized that, for some, their connections to the CACC program and students may have been limited, and that they, too, may have likely wanted to paint their institutions in a more advantageous way than what actually remains true. Once again, triangulation alleviates some of these potential self-serving biases. I was encouraged, if not surprised, that all stakeholders did

not paint a completely rosy picture of autistic students and the CACC program, thus leading me to feel that self-favorability bias was not as prevalent an issue as I had predicted.

On the methodological front, there were four further limitations. For one, I recognized that case studies are not made to be generalizable because they illustrate particular examples of a topic (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). That said, the robust autism community college program at the center of this study is not framed to be generalizable to all community college programs; we must also remember the lack of such programs in these types of institutions. Instead, this program is perhaps most comparable to a major university autism program serving similar student populations. The community college as a type of institutional context, however, most distinguishes this program from any other similarly-sized university program.

I also wrestled with privacy issues when conducting student interviews. Most students elected to have interviews held in the CACC office, in which the study rooms had glass walls. While the area was rarely populated with people, I aimed to keep the privacy of participants maintained through positioning them against the glass so any passers-by could only see the backs of their heads. Since study rooms are commonly held for peer mentor meetings, I had determined that anyone walking past the room could assume that our interview was, in fact, a peer mentor meeting. I also realized that student participants were open in talking with their peers about engaging in the study, thus alleviating concerns. Keeping students' identities masked was further challenged by some participants sharing with Elizabeth that they were engaging in the study. Several others nominated her for study participation, and therefore I interviewed her in regards to describing two students. She also served as a pseudo-mentor for one student during an observation, due to the student's regular peer mentor unable to meet with him. Peer mentors, too, also knew which students were engaging in the study when I observed their observations.



Another challenge and disappointment were the low response rate of CACC program participants who completed the demographic survey. Elizabeth had indicated that there were roughly 140 students enrolled in CACC around the time of demographic survey distribution. Considering that only 22 students filled out the demographic survey (some of them not listing their own names) – even after at least four email reminders and references to the study in classes – the demographic survey response rate amounted to 16% of program participants. While I would have liked to generate a greater yield for more holistic insights about program participants, the demographic survey was used as more of a mechanism for understanding demographic and contextual information about students I would later interview. I also felt confident in the multitude of tactics I employed to generate student interest in completing demographic surveys. In addition to the staff disseminating emails on multiple occasions, I Skyped into a course to talk about the study, and hosted a pizza social during the first day of my visit to answer questions about study participation. This final tactic amounted to three additional students completing in the demographic survey and being interviewed.

Finally, I recognize that my own biases and investment in the success and well-being of autistic community college students shaped the processes I designed to draw from their knowledge. I provided student participants with various opportunities to exert agency, such as selecting people they nominated for interviews. Moreover, I have devoted my emergent career as a scholar to capturing depictions and experiences of autistic college students, and am part of the campaign that seeks to have academia view and value their perspectives more positively and proactively. My connection to this topic and these students, though, serve as an asset, in that I envision richer stories, truths, and triumphs to surface through affording greater flexibility in my research design.

## **Chapter V: Findings - Institutional and Programmatic Contexts**

The following three chapters describe the main findings across various domains and are organized accordingly. In this chapter I detail institutional and programmatic contexts that influence how autistic community college students navigate higher education. Within Chapter 6 I outline each of the 13 students' pre-college journeys. Meanwhile, Chapter 7 dives into the bulk of the data by exploring how autistic students steer through their college experiences.

### **BMCC Site Context**

This first section dives into the largest context for the case to be more precise: the institution itself. Studying Blue Moon Community College (BMCC) as an entity, and the larger home of the CACC program, affords perspective into its issues and opportunities.

#### ***Welcome to Blue Moon***

BMCC, nestled in the suburbs of a major American city in the western United States, exists over 100 sprawling acres and opened in the 1960s. According to BMCC's 2019 college report, the college enrolls approximately 30,000 students, more than three-fourths of whom are in credit-bearing courses. The college features 211 full-time faculty, a mere number when compared to nearly quadruple as many educators who serve in part-time adjunct roles (751). More than 1,100 students are registered in its disability office; at least 150 of these registered students identify as autistic. Racially, more than 50 percent are students of color, with Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders representing the largest group (22%). The median age of students is 20, which skews lower than what the American Association of Community Colleges reports (24; "AACC fast facts 2020").

Though little information on students' financial backgrounds is publicly available, one-third of BMCC's students receive need-based aid. BMCC also boasts the highest number of

transfer students among all the community and technical colleges in the state. Its 2019 college report indicates that nearly half of first-time college students had graduated or transferred to a 4-year institution within three years. BMCC is known for a number of distinct efforts, including featuring an array of student clubs (approximately 70), a high number of Running Start students from high schools, the largest continuing education program in the state, and popular professional/technical programs including computer science, information technology, and accounting.

Perhaps most uniquely, BMCC is defined by the most recent edition of the Carnegie Classification of Institutions (2018) as a baccalaureate/associate's college, with associate's dominant. The college's website indicates that it offers 18 Bachelor's degree programs through partnerships with several universities (redacted due to ensuring institutional confidentiality). Only two participants noted in their demographic surveys of seeking to receive their Bachelor's degree at BMCC; others noted hoping to attain an associate's degree and/or transfer to a four-year institution.

BMCC represents a distinct institution, for its status as a Minority Serving Institution, high rates of autistic college students (and college autism transition program), on-campus residential options, and baccalaureate designation are unlike a common community college. This contextual information reinforces the notion of how the diverse student population demographics, opportunities for engagement, and varying credential options contribute as unique factors underlying how autistic college students navigate higher education.

### *A Voyage Through Campus*

The campus, engulfed in tall trees, greets students with banners lining the entryways that indicate they are welcome. Elevated, covered walkways connect most of the buildings in the

central campus area. Moss peeks through the cracks of the decades-old structures. Birds' nests occupy rows of trees. In essence, this tranquil place is an inviting sanctuary for students, some of whom live on BMCC's campus through its recently-opened residential hall situated on the edge of the college. Perhaps the most popular spot located on campus is the student union, flanked by countless advertisements promoting campus organizations, events, local job opportunities, and career fairs. Although many community colleges lack a central base of student involvement, BMCC defies that notion. Each day I walked through the union, strips of booths and tables promoting student organizations, volunteer efforts, and local campus partners lined the seating areas. Hordes of students gather around a large television playing *Super Smash Brothers* and other video games. A large screen descended from the cafeteria building roof, playing the *Harriet* biopic, in honor of Black History Month. As students ate lunch, some paused from their discussions to watch this celebrated film. Unlike other similar colleges where students tend to attend class and leave, BMCC has an effect of keeping its students on campus.

Mackenzie, an academic advisor and mother of a former CACC student, took me on a two-hour tour of the campus, showcasing her pride for the college's efforts, from exposing me to a "maker" space where students used 3-D printers to build practical tools, to excitedly sharing models of architectural creations that students in an interior design program crafted. Along the way she introduced me to representatives from various disciplines and units on campus, including the international students office and the workforce education program.

Upon stepping out of one office, I saw drawings on the window and asked Mackenzie about their significance. She told me about her son, an aspiring animator, who had attained recognition on campus for his insightful drawings. This particular piece of artwork featured a person looking at other people, from afar, playing a game. The outsider character's thought

bubble listed the following: “I wish I could just fit in with others.” It was then that Mackenzie told me how her autistic son, who had graduated from the CACC program, attained his associate degree from BMCC, and is now pursuing his dream at a local university.

### ***CACC Program: Where the Captains Sail the Ship***

Burrowed in an alcove off the back of a central campus study spot, the CACC office features two main offices for Elizabeth (program director) and Taylor (program manager), each of its full-time staff members who figuratively sail the ship. Taylor shares her cramped office with part-time staff Gabriella and Frannie, who also serve as peer mentors. Outside of these offices are study rooms for students, for which CACC has dibs on three of them for peer mentor meetings. Without much soundproofing, voices pervade across the rooms, a stark contrast to the “quiet zone” labels scattered in the vicinity.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the building, CACC occupied an unused classroom that they frame as their study hall. Students can use the space as both a place for meeting with peer mentors and working on course assignments. Both Elizabeth and Taylor lamented the lack of a formal, cohesive program office to serve its growing space of students, prompting them to campaign for a more expansive spot where they would not need to share space and resources. On the last day of my visit, we toured a relatively empty office suite in another building, also in the center of campus. This would be their new home, complete with a number of offices for staff members, peer mentors, and student study spaces. I recommended that each student space be themed around some of their core interests, an idea that Elizabeth and Taylor adopted when they later shared with me a floorplan, complete with names I pitched.

### *A Sea Change on Campus*

Nigel, newly serving as BMCC's vice president of academic affairs, albeit a longtime faculty member, described the transformations that the college had been experiencing. Two years ago the college welcomed a new provost and president, enlisting a cabinet who was also relatively new in their roles. One prior president had been running the show for more than two decades. "Everybody knew exactly how they ran and whether they liked it or not, it was just that it was the norm," Nigel described. That president, who left BMCC a decade beforehand, preceded no fewer than four presidents over the subsequent 10 years. Lacking stability and facing unrest among undervalued faculty, BMCC was in a state of flux. Such rockiness would also inhibit CACC's development and growth, as described later.

Campus stakeholders have been recuperating from prior administrators' actions during this transition period. As Aztec, an administrator in the diversity office, described, "people are using their own bias and interpreting in their past trauma, [such] that it doesn't allow for that kind of permanent change that we're looking for in people's behavior, because then they'll rationalize it and dismiss it." Aztec, who had recently moved to the western U.S., explained that he has identified much conflict aversion in this part of the country:

So if people won't deal directly with the person that they're having a question or issue with, they'll go around and do a process behind someone without addressing it with that person, like reporting to HR and then having that issue come up later, or HR has to step in and talk about it because those people won't talk to each other about it.

Consequently, the campus culture has amounted to everyone being out for themselves. "We have high levels of individualism where people are like, 'no, me above the community,'" Aztec added. This mentality has most explicitly manifested in faculty or staff from marginalized communities

engaging in a “competition of the oppressed,” which becomes particularly destructive when individuals only examine situations from their unique lens, as Aztec mentioned.

The political climate at the college, and in the country more generally, has led more individuals to keep to themselves. People avoid conflicts, but when they emerge, fuses break. Faculty hold onto coursework, not sharing resources with others. Furthermore, a gap exists between full-time and adjunct faculty. Grace, a CACC instructor and campus faculty member, explained that nearly 80 percent of the college faculty are adjuncts and often lack the same amount of training, time compensation, and appreciation as their counterparts.

### *A Campus Siloed Like the “Tentacles of a Jellyfish”*

Collectively, these campus challenges contributed to an unfortunate reality: the college is siloed. One staff member in the workforce education program described the campus units as like the “tentacles of a jellyfish.” While new leadership has aimed to make the campus more connected through trainings and unified programming, the prior siloed mentality has inhibited connectivity.

“Part of the siloing is the fight for funding,” Elizabeth explained. “So people are like, ‘we can't work with you because this is our money and we don't want to share that funding with you, and these are our students and we're serving them.’” If the college’s “shoestring budget,” as Craig – Elizabeth’s supervisor, a former CACC instructor, and head of the campus learning institute – shared was not enough of a barrier, the siloed nature only further forestalled employees’ efficacy in accomplishing tasks. “When I first came here, it was a more siloed institution than many other places I'd been there because there weren't a ton of cross-campus structures to really facilitate collaboration,” Craig described. Many collaborative efforts stem not from administrators, but rather from smaller units and departments. Such siloes have created difficulties for faculty and

staff to access information about resources they can consult in their work. Aztec said, “we're trying to do more integrated ways of understanding and operating, but because there's a lack of trust, it's very difficult.” A few new campus efforts, though, particularly under the auspices of newer administrators, are aimed at upending siloed practices.

### ***Forming a Cooperative Pod***

The campus' newer “Faculty Professional Development Center” (FPDC) has worked to “break down some of those silos,” Craig explained. Replete with whiteboards, books, pamphlets on future trainings, and other materials to serve *all* instructors and staff on campus, the FPDC represents a space for ongoing learning. Grace explained it in the following way:

Right now there's discussion of like ‘what is the kind of standard every faculty member who teaches here and comes on board,’ ‘what is it they need to be trained in?’ And there's discussions around that. And I know [Universal Design for Learning] and accessibility are at the top of the list along with racial equity.

Along with the FPDC, the campus allocates several days of the year toward trainings for all faculty and staff. One mandatory effort, entitled “Campus Issues Day,” entails both main lectures and breakout sessions centered on topics that harken back to a central theme. Everyone takes a break from their regular roles to engage in the programming. Recent “Campus Issues Day” themes have centered on climate justice and emergency preparedness. Through these professional development days, the campus aims to build unity and cooperation, tearing down the siloes that have long separated stakeholders.

Another unifying effort is the campus' engagement in Achieving the Dream, aiming to “increase retention and close equity gaps,” as Craig explained. “We recognize that every group of students has different challenges and that the system is kind of built on a system that



historically has been designed for really one population more than anything,” Nigel said. In the past, campus units operated independently and would not share results with one another, but under new campus leadership, administrators are promoting cooperation. As a result the campus no longer features “50 different initiatives going in different directions,” as Nigel put it, but rather one central trajectory. Though BMCC is still in its infancy in participating in Achieving the Dream, it has already encouraged administrators, faculty and staff “to get out of our silos,” Nigel said.

### ***Raising the Flags of Campus Autism Acceptance***

The CACC program, as will be described, plays an integral role in spreading autism acceptance at BMCC. One of its offshoot efforts entails working with campus stakeholders to bridge units in building autism understanding – thus reducing the pervasive silos – and offering autism trainings throughout the year. Aztec and Elizabeth, along with another campus staff member, offer a diversity training that features an autism component. As Aztec described the content, “there are levels, there's spectrum within spectrums and so we need to discuss those kind of concepts.” Laura, manager of the campus student conduct office, explained how these trainings allowed faculty and staff to become more aware, understanding, and adept in working with autistic students. For instance, she detailed how she helps faculty reconcile autistic students who present challenges in the classroom:

Some of the self-reflection questions that I've put up there to start getting the community to think about ‘what is this, what is actually happening in this situation?’ You have your emotions but what is actually happening in this situation? And so, ‘cause we have to help both the faculty and the student in that situation. But it's different if it's a threat or ‘I hurt you’ versus ‘I felt intimidated and this is how you impacted someone.’

In many ways Elizabeth represents the face of autism on campus, as not only the head of CACC since its inception a decade ago, but also as an autistic self-advocate. Every year Elizabeth leads a training for incoming faculty on autism, as well as leads autism workshops for other staff.

Faculty and staff are welcome to attend trainings for CACC's peer mentors, too, to attain further context on the efforts she handles. Accordingly, this level of awareness has led the campus to be more attuned to their growing autistic student population. Taylor explained the impact of these trainings:

I would say more often than not, the faculty that is gone from, you know, pretty uneducated or uninformed about neurodiversity to like our shining stars are the instructors that, you know, have gone to [Elizabeth's] trainings on campus... we have drop-in hours now and so faculty can come and just drop in and say, "[Elizabeth], I have this happening with a student."

Through Elizabeth's leadership, faculty come to her and CACC for assistance. Laura said, "I think most of our faculty will do reports in general, asking for help. Like 'I don't know what to do now.'" Through partnering with Elizabeth on the campus wellness team and in a student conduct capacity, Laura has learned how to more thoughtfully and intentionally communicate with autistic students. She also knows to enlist Elizabeth immediately, should a conduct issue emerge. Similarly, Mackenzie, who leads tours of campus to new students in addition to advising current students, has incorporated visits of the CACC office to spread awareness. Ellen, a CACC instructor and campus faculty member, succinctly captured the point: "there's more acceptance with visibility."

Because of Elizabeth's capacity in elevating autism acceptance, she has also served an essential piece of connecting spaces that were once siloed. Craig, Ellen, Laura, Nigel, and Taylor

all referenced Elizabeth as the person who unifies stakeholders through raising understanding of autism, a central piece that links each piece of campus. Taylor said that Elizabeth “is very intentional about going places, networking, getting the name of the program out there and being part of the whole conversation, ‘cause it is a growing movement.” Through building relationships across people and entities, Elizabeth has established herself and CACC as a resource on not only autism, but also inclusivity. CACC’s website, for instance, boasts an array of links, documents, and other resources for faculty to consult on supporting *all* students with diverse learning needs. One page notes: “support all students in finding, understanding, and using course materials by using Plain Language for your syllabus, assignments, and instruction.”

### ***Saluting the CACC Program with Honors***

For the past three years, BMCC has been featured as one of the top colleges for autistic students by Best Value Schools, as Elizabeth proudly shared. While she does not know the criteria that goes into selecting it, this distinction underpins BMCC’s prominence in serving autistic students, due in large part to CACC. In fact, the program was ranked as the only community college on a separate list of best colleges for autistic students. CACC “brings students to the college,” Elizabeth said, and more importantly to administrators, “it brings money to the college.” Taylor echoed its popularity as supporting the college: “We make the national news a lot and they love us.” CACC’s website notes that they regularly receive requests from other colleges around the country on how other campuses can start similar programs. When BMCC needs to recruit students and showcase its unique programs, CACC is regularly chosen, Nigel said. “If the college is applying for an award or, you know, some kind of recognition, they would... put [CACC] on the list to highlight.” How CACC has come to epitomize a shining light

on campus today, though, belies its years of trying to be taken seriously. This requires a deep dive that dates back a decade when the idea of serving autistic students was only a distant reality.

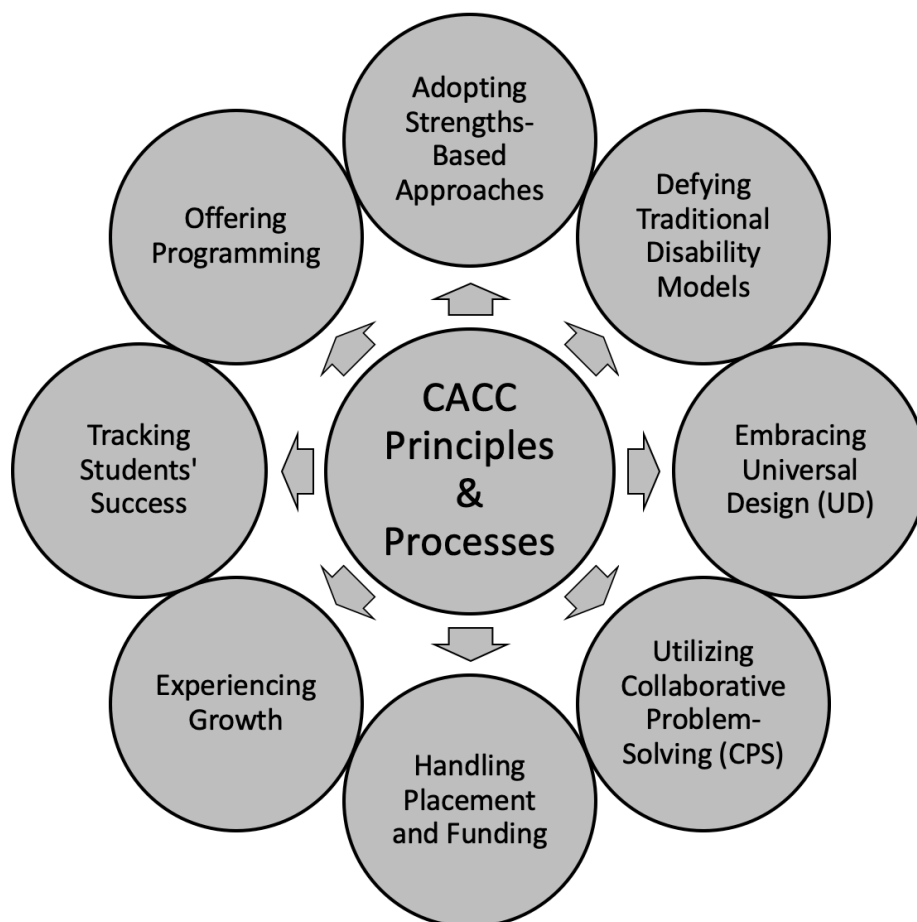
### **CACC Program Context**

Understanding the context behind CACC's philosophy, evolution, and programming lends clarity on how the program, one decade in its run, contributes to autistic community college students' experiences. As illustrated, CACC's robust framework, development, and core attributes have amounted to it becoming a fixture at BMCC. See Figure 2.

### ***Current Philosophy***

“My bottom line belief is that [at] our soul... is that we are also humans,” Elizabeth explained. “And so what benefits human beings benefits us as well.” Through offering validation, building on strengths, and humanizing experiences, CACC promotes a culture of respect and purpose. These values are articulated across a variety of platforms, including its website messaging, orientation programming, conversations with students, and, as I experienced, interviews with the main CACC staff. As Taylor described, “so much of what we do, there's no roadmap for.” Indeed, this leaves CACC with the space to set a path with its guiding framework and tenets.

Among the most important principles is that students and their families should *not* be paying for program services. Instead, they only pay for the program's credit-bearing courses (often counting as electives toward their degrees), akin to other BMCC courses. This distinct quality, illustrated on its FAQ website page, underscores CACC's mission that having the opportunity to succeed in college should not come at an additional cost. And the costs of being in college – financial or otherwise – should not inhibit autistic students from being their true selves.

**Figure 2.***CACC Principles and Processes*

Frannie shared Elizabeth’s philosophy: autistic people should “have the right and should be allowed to exist in the world as they see fit.”

Accordingly, Elizabeth has designed CACC to follow four tenets that guide their mission and operations: executive functioning, social interaction, self-advocacy, and self-regulation. Executive functioning entails addressing issues related to time management, organization, and task initiation. Social interaction recognizes how students engage with other individuals. Self-advocacy encourages students to take charge of their lives through requesting assistance and

expressing their needs. Self-regulation, while sometimes incorporated as a component of executive functioning in some contexts, enables students to meet objectives and make sense of feelings as they encounter challenges. These domains collectively encompass how CACC frames its language and programming. A number of particular values fit within the general CACC philosophy, as demonstrated below.

### ***Adopting Strengths-Based Approaches Buoy Student Self-Esteem***

Most saliently, CACC works to empower students based on the unique strengths they possess. This idea permeates across everything it accomplishes, and is apparent across a number of interviewees, too. Grace explained, “it’s acknowledging the things we’re great at and the things we’re not so great at. And let’s come up with tools to address it.” Elizabeth has designed CACC to help students recognize their weaknesses, but not to feel down about them. This point came across clearly as Elizabeth talked about Thrawn, one of the CACC students, in that she is “helping him understand that he doesn’t have anything to be ashamed of by being himself.” Elizabeth recognizes that many students enter CACC from a place of being told they are incapable of accomplishing tasks like their peers. She avoids this *less than* mentality by telling students that society should meet students halfway, and that students should find ways of leveraging their strengths. For many individuals this is a game changer. Pete, the mother of CACC student John, said, “the [CACC] program tells you you’re not broken. It just says you’re different. And there’s nothing wrong with that.”

During my initial interview with Elizabeth she explained how this strengths-based philosophy is embedded into CACC’s mission:

I think the students want to be successful in college and feel good about themselves... I just want them to understand that they’re okay, because so many of them come in feeling

like they're not okay, and that they can't socialize and they can't do this and they can't start their projects and they can't do so many things. And so I really want them to start focusing on what they can do and how they can use those strengths.

This philosophy is not just talk, but rather incorporated into CACC's dialogues with students from the initial meetings to students' subsequent courses. The findings elaborate on the takeaways of the strengths-based philosophy, as illustrated by John, who explained how the mentality shaped his own interpretation: "it's much easier to strengthen an area that you're already strong at as opposed to working up from an area that you really don't know how to do." Julia, another CACC student, said how this philosophy has helped her reframe her outlook. "Work smarter, not harder is actually a legitimate way of approaching life and he will probably be more successful that way. That wasn't really something that I had gotten before and I cannot overstate how valuable that lesson was."

### ***Repelling Against Traditional Disability Frameworks***

From the moment students learn about CACC, the idea that *they* have initiative and should be valued in society is explicit. Elizabeth veers from traditional medical-based models, often used in explaining autism, and instead embraces social justice and intersectionality philosophies in designing CACC messaging and programming. At CACC's monthly information session, Elizabeth declared to about 15 prospective students: "We believe there are many acceptable ways of being in the world." Here, autism is not seen as a weakness or negative difference. Both written materials and people involved in CACC harken back to the program's social and diversity models of disability. As one press release mentioned, CACC helps students recognize the strengths they possess, as opposed to try to "fix" what makes them different from their peers. Using language regarding *empowerment* and *agency* only reinforces CACC's role in

making students feel like they have an active role in shaping their college journeys and lives ahead. As Elizabeth indicated, “we want to give them a chance to think about [their identities] on their own terms.”

### ***Exercising Universal Design***

Another central piece of CACC is exercising Universal Design (UD), which aims to make content accessible to students no matter their means of processing, communication, and learning (Center for Universal Design, 1997). CACC embeds UD into everything from its workshops and meetings, to courses and communication methods. Program faculty offer multiple options for students to complete assignments. For example, Wonder, a CACC instructor and BMCC faculty member, allows students to express their knowledge via various types of journal presentations, including artwork, PowerPoint, and writing. Gabriella, a CACC program assistant and peer mentor, said that learning about UD has led her to more mindfully design flyers and brochures that can reach students who may make sense of information differently. On CACC’s website, they possess a whole list of tips for faculty on how they can incorporate UD principles into their courses. Perhaps the most salient impact of CACC discussing and applying UD: the college as a whole seeing its value. As Craig said, “Universal Design is more embedded in our culture, I think, because of this program.”

### ***Anchoring Programming in Collaborative Problem-Solving (CPS)***

CACC incorporates CPS as a pivotal component of how they interact with students. “Through conversation [CPS] forces the individual to think about what’s going on with themselves,” Elizabeth described. She works to help students understand the situation or conflict in front of them, identify resolutions that align with their desires, and consider impacts on other individuals involved. Through talking out issues, students take agency in creating a “meaningful



solution,” as Frannie explained. Taylor detailed one way she approached CPS with a student who wanted to drop a course, despite having an “A” in it.

You just have to be like “I hear that you’re really upset from this grade. You know, I’ve had that happen before, especially in my math classes at college and I had a similar feeling of facing not wanting to go back to class.” You know, relating to them and things that have happened to you as well. And after you’ve shared your concern of, you know, “I would be concerned that you put in all this work into the quarter so far into this class, and you’ve learned so much, and I would be concerned if you didn’t get credit for it, because you decided to drop it.” And then working with them and being like, “what do you think we can do about that?”

Positioning students to create solutions, while concurrently sharing their concerns and demonstrating relatability, builds the relationship and opportunity to resolve issues. CACC’s CPS-based approaches have resonated with other individuals connected with the program. Per Elizabeth’s recommendations, Laura said that she has been reading books involving CPS. Gabriella has transferred these skills into her “other jobs and positions and how I interact with other people as well.” In her classrooms Wonder said she uses CPS to resolve hypersensitivity issues:

I say, “okay, so we have one student that would prefer to have it this way. Is there anyone who's opposed to that or how can we make sure that if you don't like the blinds close, that you're also in a comfortable learning environment?” So I help them, [and] I have them help me troubleshoot some of these situations.

Craig, too, said he thinks about CPS often and views it as impactful with CACC students:

Collaborative problem solving as an approach is pretty powerful. And the fact that they inculcate that in all of their staff as a fundamental grounding principle is, look, you're there to brainstorm with students and try to help them solve some problems on their own. At times CACC staff are surprised to hear the solutions that students came up for themselves. Taylor recalled a scenario when a student, facing challenges in completing assignments for his music theory course, identified through CPS that he would be more focused through *teaching* course content to his parents. It just was a solution that I never would have thought of," she said.

### ***Hoisting the Program***

CACC's roots stem from a BMCC pilot program designed to support the success of autistic community college students. Thirteen students were enrolled during its inception. Elizabeth, a fixture in the autism advocacy community, had been enlisted to support this emergent program, but quickly identified its problem: being run by a psychologist, social worker, and occupational therapist. The "psychologist," as Elizabeth described him using air quotes, would position students to engage in a form of pseudo-therapy and apply much medical and deficit-based language that produced alienation. Elizabeth was among the alienated individuals, as she would be openly mocked at meetings. Ultimately, once the pilot ended, everyone was fired, except for Elizabeth, whose approach was more strengths-based and empowering toward autistic students. From there she spent the summer designing a curriculum and more formally launched the program in fall 2011 with 18 students:

When I was designing this program, I did a lot of research into college students, so not necessarily autistic college students, but college students. And good college programs and good colleges and what they do for their students to support them. And then I also looked at things that said like "what does a college student need to have to be

successful?” And all those different things. I put quite a bit of research into what students need, what colleges are doing, what people are saying autistic students don’t have versus my experience about what autistic students do or do not have or need. And I would say that the number one thing people were saying over and over again that all college students need is self-advocacy.

Elizabeth reviewed the limited number of autism-based programs at other colleges around the United States, as well as programs supporting incoming students’ success, for inspiration. In the end, Elizabeth considered what offerings would support college students as a whole, and account for autistic students’ needs as a subset.

While in its early days CACC lacked a set of formal academic courses – now a major component of its framework – from the beginning it incorporated meetings with students to talk about their college journeys. Over time, students’ weekly peer mentor meetings have changed, such as revising items on the checklist students receive and altering the language for readability, to meet students’ needs and desires. CACC’s peer mentors have also engaged in more robust orientations and workshops to enhance their adeptness in working with autistic students.

### ***Maneuvering Placement and Funding***

Perhaps the most notable change has been CACC’s placement. Originally it existed as a subset of the college’s DSO. In this capacity CACC faced much oversight and CACC reconciled its own social justice and diversity-based philosophy, which existed in stark contrast to its parent unit’s more medical-based framework. Elizabeth discussed the DSO not being a good fit for CACC. Further complicating the situation was administrators diverting funds from CACC. For years CACC relied on donations to cover administrative costs and other resources; Elizabeth’s own salary was covered by the college, but part-time staff were not. Elizabeth’s frustration with

the funding situation existed alongside the fact that CACC was responsible for enlisting dozens and dozens of new students to the college who were bringing money to the institution.

By virtue of the campus bringing in new leadership and the program's reallocation to exist within the career center, CACC has finally received a yearly budget over the past two years. Elizabeth noted that, "I don't think anyone really realized before that that we were not funded, because I think that the former VP kind of kept that under his hat." These funds pay for peer mentors, professional development and travel, and other necessary components for programmatic operations.

### ***Reaching New Horizons***

In its first decade of existence CACC has not only continued to expand, but also can hardly keep up with the demand. The program's peak was in the 2018-19 academic year when it served around 140 students total, and it regularly reaches close to that number. During fall 2019 CACC welcomed 60 new students and envisions seeing similar numbers in the future.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, CACC has hired more peer mentors and has offered multiple sections of its individual courses, so as to prevent high enrollment in any individual section. With more students come more feedback. Elizabeth takes their concerns and requests seriously, such as adjusting the course sequence and creating new courses to reflect their interests.

Elizabeth and Taylor regularly meet to discuss programmatic changes. While Elizabeth handles more of the general CACC vision and leadership, and Taylor manages administrative tasks and overseeing peer mentors, they serve as a team that draws on each other's unique insights. Taylor, who also identifies as autistic, and is a generation younger than Elizabeth,

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<sup>5</sup> The Coronavirus pandemic saw CACC take a hit in new enrollment to about 45 in Fall 2020, according to Elizabeth, but was still not as hard hit as expected. Elizabeth noted in a follow-up conversation that these students were very engaged in the orientation process.

brings complementary ideas to the team. Through offering drop-in hours, the pair hear students' concerns and consult with each other on how to resolve issues. That said, they continue to wrestle with how to obtain the best feedback possible from students, as Taylor shared:

... finding a way for students to give feedback is difficult cause a lot of them won't do it in an honest way or aren't able to kind of reflect on their experience as a whole and summarize how they feel about it.

Peer mentor meetings have represented one space for generating ideas from students. Elizabeth stepped in as a peer mentor for Keith, a CACC student, when Taylor was unavailable, and asked Keith to share with her feedback on new approaches to course assignments. Directly giving students opportunities to critique course material illustrates just one technique CACC has employed to incorporate into its second decade of operations.

### *Charting Students' Success*

Much like how BMCC faces challenges in tracking students' success, CACC lacks data to draw on in showcasing its efficacy. The limited numbers, though, do not compromise its promise in not only increasing student retention, but also elevating students' happiness. CACC proudly proclaims that its program experiences around 90% retention each academic year, meaning more of its students remain in college at BMCC than the student population writ large. CACC courses feature student completion rates of 85-90%, as Elizabeth noted at its orientation. While students are not required to complete the whole set of courses that span three academic years, some students do; others continue using programmatic services, even if they do not take courses. Other students leave and obtain their college degrees or "job out." No one trajectory is similar.

CACC aims to follow up on its students after leaving the program. The program hosts an alumni Facebook group and LinkedIn group, as well as encourages students to keep in touch, some of whom periodically return to talk about their lives as university students or members of the workforce. Two graduates spoke at CACC's 2019 orientation; one works at a major tech company, the other attends a local university. CACC is working on more effectively tracking students' paths, Taylor said, but it remains difficult to follow them beyond their time at BMCC. Thankfully, since most students remain in CACC once they start, Elizabeth and Taylor witness their experiences and evolution as emergent adults.

### ***Surmounting Conflicts***

Through running the CACC program, Elizabeth and Taylor – along with their colleagues across other campus spaces – must manage the innumerable conflicts and dilemmas that emerge when working with many dozens of students. Whether handling isolated incidents or continued challenges, BMCC staff rely on a combination of collaboration, communication, and creativity.

During my first day visiting BMCC, the campus faced a massive incident that disrupted bus service and required police intervention: a student attempting to commit suicide by jumping off a parking garage adjacent to a bus station. This situation, complemented by continued winter dreariness, had amounted to many CACC students expressing distress. One CACC student found his routine unsettled by not being able to take his normal bus home. Laura, familiar with many CACC students, went on the scene and redirected the student, who may have otherwise become fixated with the troubling situation. She credited her rapport and relationship building as reducing the likelihood of potential problems emerging.

Providing emotional support to students in distress commonly unfolds. According to CACC staff, they have intervened when students express self-harm, demonstrate anger toward

their peers, break down crying, or act inappropriately. Many of these behaviors stem from overcoming trauma. Frannie said she tends to validate students' experiences and recommend resources to them, such as counseling. Recently Taylor worked with a student who faced PTSD from a negative past experience with a peer mentor. Talking out the challenges, however, made all the difference, she shared.

The prolonged winter had also been responsible for many students feeling distressed, much more pronounced than in previous years, as Taylor and Elizabeth shared. Students' emotional states, for one, have been impacted. The pair acknowledged students' sentiments by providing recommendations on resources they could consult, as well as purchasing healthy snacks that peer mentors gave out during their weekly meetings.

Unlike seasonal distress, classroom disruption affects students throughout the entire year. This issue creates much frustration among fellow students, particularly those who become irritated by others' manifestations of autistic traits they deem unfavorable. Emotional regulation issues among autistic students are a challenge that Laura and the BMCC student conduct office face regularly. Whereas at times most of the issues can be remedied through sharing with students the importance of talking out problems, the difficulties rise once physical destruction materializes. This may range from throwing objects to damaging property. Laura explained how she talks through challenges with disruptive students.

It's like, "let's help you understand what this is and how it affects other people and help you figure out how to start bringing your responses to your feelings into a way that still works for you, but does not disrupt the learning environment of other students. And where can you go when you're feeling like this?" Right. And so we give them places to go and ways to like hold it together for a hot second until you get out of the class.

BMCC's student conduct office works to understand students' behaviors and ascertain how to implement supports that inhibit disruptive issues from persisting. For years Laura and Elizabeth have collaborated to address potential issues and lessen the odds of escalation. Laura recognized that many individuals fear the idea of getting autistic students in trouble, in part stemming from concerns that noting an autistic person causing a problem on campus – not unlike any individual being disruptive – would make the accuser come off as ableist and thus discriminating against autistic people. “Everyone from faculty to public safety officers always seemed hesitant to put in any type of formal report or complain about our [autistic] students,” she said. Instead, she works from the mindset of educating the campus about appropriateness and what constitutes reasons for reporting incidents. Ultimately, though, she works to avoid filing official conduct incident reports and use situations as learning opportunities. Elizabeth echoed this approach. “We try to help the student come up with a plan themselves,” she said. Accordingly, BMCC has fewer problems than other campuses she was familiar with in addressing “autism behavior problems.” The constant communication between CACC and the student conduct office amounts to identifying issues during their earliest stages and developing solutions that meet students' needs.

Some dilemmas are out of CACC's hands, as in the case of their text messaging platform changing their format and resulting in technological issues. For several months staff and students could not use the service, a major disruption, since this represents the mechanism for peer mentors and staff to send reminders and important messages. Through employing alternate methods, such as email, the staff made the best of the situation, but struggled to maintain the same type of contact, Elizabeth said.



### ***Programming and Components***

I identified four primary attributes of CACC programming that shape students' experiences: cohort courses, peer mentor meetings, neurodiversity-focused events, and student-staff meetings. While cohort courses and peer mentorship are most substantial, neurodiversity-focused events and student-staff meetings similarly embed students in useful programming. As some content related to each of these components is highlighted in the study's main findings, I use this space toward providing an overview.

**Cohort Courses.** Elizabeth, along with a team of faculty across an array of disciplines at BMCC, teaches CACC's college credit-bearing cohort courses, exclusive to students enrolled in the program. Each term generally features three options, one each for students to complete based on their progression in the program. During my site visit, the current structure featured eight courses across nearly three academic years. Courses center on a variety of topics that tie back to CACC tenets, including executive functioning and self-advocacy, as well as wellness, professional development, and communication. The initial cohort course sets the tone by involving students in developing aspirational resumes and vision boards, and completing StrengthsFinder tests, in an effort to have them recognize their objectives and assets. Some courses are taught by individual instructors, whereas others are offered via a co-instructor model. Through relying on UD, CACC courses employ a number of tools to engage students, allowing them to work individually and with partners, engage in discussions, and develop creative final projects, just to name a handful of techniques. For many students, this may represent their first time in a setting full of other autistic people, and while the autism piece is not always central to the content at hand, it often seeps into dialogue.

Through reviewing a selection of course syllabi, it is apparent that CACC works to be precise and positive in framing material. In addition to listing standard statements regarding grade breakdowns, safe spaces, anti-discrimination, and academic calendars – all in a concise and clear manner, often complemented with visuals – syllabi share unique points. For example, the executive functioning course listed the instructor’s expectations, which included the vitality of students communicating their concerns, saving files, and finding distinct ways of contributing to class discussions. Each syllabus is specific in wording, using bolded words, underlining, italics and other markers to show key points. Syllabi also incorporate a number of hyperlinks to connect students to campus resources and helpful materials that may support their learning. Through demonstrating clarity and detail, students can use syllabi as more than just a guide for a particular course, but rather as a tool to navigate college more generally.

During my time at BMCC I interviewed four faculty members – Ellen, Grace, Jake, and Wonder – who have taught in CACC, along with Elizabeth and Craig (Elizabeth’s current supervisor, who has taught in CACC in past years). They discussed the approaches they employ in their curriculum development and working with autistic students.

Most importantly, faculty seek students’ input in establishing structure and ensuring accessibility. Wonder integrates “digital breaks” and “movement breaks” into a class session to give them a space to look at their devices or walk around, inviting students to agree on how long the break should be. Craig has developed assignments that build students up, often through reducing big endeavors into smaller tasks. Ellen values offering hands-on, practical experiences for students. In her communication-focused courses, for instance, they engage in mindful listening and reflections. In creating curriculum, faculty turn to colleagues for assistance. Wonder, for example, has drawn from Jake’s experience on setting guidelines in using digital

devices. All faculty who teach in CACC described Elizabeth as the pivotal “go-to” figure in garnering guidance.

One key factor in successful teaching, according to faculty, is in building trust, which results from making classrooms comfortable spaces where everyone can express themselves. “If you can get a good strong trusting environment, I think it can really go a long way into alleviating some of the fears,” Jake said. His practice entails informing students that cutting off their peers when speaking is unacceptable. ““You don't talk over someone else talking in the classroom when they have the floor,”” he referenced as a talking point.

Challenges occur in teaching courses, though, ranging from recognizing students’ individual needs while also accounting for the majority, to being explicit about the value of particular activities for students who question their purpose. Utilizing CPS is often the most helpful technique in helping students troubleshoot situations that produce confusion or frustration.

Indeed, facilitating a course is no easy feat, though all CACC instructors recognized the value of teaching these students, gaining new skillsets, and finding transferability in their pedagogy. Faculty continually reflected on how, while their mission was to teach their students, often the students taught as much to them.

Connecting with students has also afforded invaluable rewards. Wonder recalled how one student demonstrated empathy in such an impactful way that it brought her to tears. Wonder mentioned how during one class she shared with her students that she would need to cancel the following class session due to taking care of her sick dog. One of the students, who had longed seemed distant – staring at her computer, never raising her hand – removed her headphones and raised her hand. For Wonder, this represented a significant moment.

[The student] says, “I can't... I don't have a dog, but I can imagine how sad you must be. May I give you a hug?” I mean, I still like get emotional even thinking about it because she was here, she was for three weeks. I was like, “what?” You know, how do I reach the student? And all of a sudden she gives me this gift. And I said, “you know what, I would really love that. That would be really great.” And she just got up in the middle of class, came up and just embraced me, gave me this wonderful hug. So I think just empathy, but it's not expressed in the same ways that we might write and see in other, other classes.

Another quality Wonder appreciated from her CACC students is their willingness to engage in reflection and take responsibility for their choices. Students will commonly come up to her and mention precisely why they have not turned in their assignments on time, thus advocating for themselves. Jake has also appreciated the thoughtfulness behind students' comments, articulated in the research papers they produce, noting that some of the best papers he has graded derived from autistic students in his CACC courses. Supporting students, both in their academics and lives more generally, provides much fulfillment. As Grace put it, “I like being part of an effort to empower these students.”

Through teaching in CACC, instructors have translated some of the successful measures in these contexts to other courses. Ellen said that one of her class activities, encouraging students to engage in mindful listening, proved so beneficial that she incorporated it into her other courses' curriculum. Craig mentioned how the students “might've taught me more about Universal Design than I ever learned in any workshop that I ever took,” prompting him to practice UD in other spaces. Jake's comments paralleled Craig, with Jake finding that he is “always learning something from them.” For example, he realized that delivering lectures is not the optimal way of engaging CACC students, and he has shifted his teaching techniques across

this course and other courses to be more interactive. Similarly, Wonder has appreciated the chance to “stretch” her teaching skills through working with “such independent, strong thinkers.”

**Peer Mentorship.** Each week CACC students meet with a peer mentor who discusses academic skills and life experiences with them. Elizabeth described peer mentors as guides who have been in college a bit longer than CACC students, and can provide “another set of eyes” on a number of tasks, such as completing assignments. Whether completing their undergrad or starting graduate school, most peer mentors are drawn from local universities, often studying psychology, health, or related fields.

Peer mentors are not to tutor, but rather offer support and advocacy to CACC students, Gabriella said. Typically a student begins by having individual peer mentor meetings each week, though into the second year of the program they may move into small group meetings with a few other CACC students who share a common mentor. Eventually large group meetings may become the norm with four to five other students, according to Gabriella. At this point peer mentors “take a little bit of a step back,” and allow students to take greater initiative. Taylor echoed this point: “the job of a peer mentor is to become obsolete.”

Meetings range in length, depending on how long it may take the pair to run through items on the weekly agendas/checklists they review. I observed peer mentor meetings for nine of the 13 autistic student participants (ranging from 15-45 minutes), most of them taking place in a tiny study room where the peer mentor and student, sitting across from each other with their laptops, talk through a list of items.

Meeting agendas, designed and often modified each term by Elizabeth and Taylor, are organized in a list-like format with symbols and images situated against each point. Items may vary week to week to reflect the timing of the term (e.g., registering for courses next semester,

prepping for finals), but commonly entail discussing study skills, reviewing assignments on Canvas, and communicating concerns with campus staff. While peer mentors and students have separate agendas, the language varies depending on the audience. Each agenda item features a space for the individual to take notes and process the information. Akin to syllabi, agendas contain hyperlinks, bullet points, and bolded language to accentuate points. Throughout the meeting, peer mentors prompt students to discuss their thoughts about their college experiences and encourage them to take charge of tasks like paying for courses and writing emails to instructors. Each peer mentor may meet with as many as 12-15 students each week. Mentors are trained by Elizabeth prior to working with students on topics like autism as a culture and communicating with autistic people. Elizabeth assigns new peer mentors with returning CACC students, more acquainted with programmatic norms and coursework. Some CACC students, depending on their communication preferences, may meet with peer mentors remotely, though all of the students whose formal meetings I observed met with each other in person.

Over time, CACC has engaged in more workshopping and training with peer mentors to best prepare them for their roles. The challenge becomes when they hire international peer mentors, some of whom return to their home countries over the summer and must handle the training remotely. Accordingly, CACC has shifted the hiring and training processes to unfold earlier. Many peer mentors tend to stay with CACC for about a year, though Taylor hoped many would stay longer, thus easing their ability to hire program assistants (like Gabriella and Frannie), who wield more responsibility and can guide newer peer mentors. This pathway represented Taylor's own journey, having started in CACC as a peer mentor in late 2016 and eventually becoming a program assistant before serving in her current role. Taylor has found overseeing the peer mentors to be a rewarding aspect of her job. "I'm super invested in growing

our peer mentors as people and as professionals in the field,” she said. Though Taylor’s role is more administrative now, occasionally she will substitute for peer mentors and sit in on meetings with students.

Based on the variety of students’ personalities and levels of experience that peer mentors possess, CACC establishes matches that should work for both sides. Taylor said the program sometimes engages in “flip-flopping” should it not be an ideal pair, but generally staff are very intentional in setting the right duos. One lesson they have learned is to place a new peer mentor with a returning CACC student, as opposed to someone who is brand new. In this way the returning CACC students can familiarize the peer mentor with some of the processes.

Taylor explained that one of the key aspects of successful peer mentor relationships is “to figure out what [students] love.” Many students distrust peer mentors at first due to having negative past experiences with mentors or similar figures. Therefore, she encourages peer mentors to exhibit interest and engagement with students on topics that aid their comfortable and spark passion.

**Neurodiversity Events.** Albeit not a consistent piece of CACC programming, Neurodiversity-focused events cater toward its base of autistic students, and invite members of the community to join in activities as well. CACC has worked in partnership with other campus programs to offer a STEM-focused career conference that brings in high school and college students, their relatives, campus and community members, and other individuals interested in finding professional opportunities for autistic individuals. One CACC mainstay has been its annual symposium for autistic self-advocates to discuss their life experiences. In particular, it leverages the perspectives of younger members of the autism community. Edweena, a CACC student and campus leader, served as the event emcee. “I felt comfortable behind the

microphone,” she said, finding it to be an “awesome” opportunity. The event typically draws a large audience and raises awareness of CACC in the process.

CACC, on its own, has occasionally hosted social events, though these have not been a centerpiece. Although Edweena developed a pizza social, taking place when I visited the program, lack of promotion resulted in limited attendance. An Anime-themed club, featured as an official campus organization, derived from CACC’s base of autistic students interested in Japanese animation. Ultimately, outside of the aforementioned conferences, neurodiversity-focused events have not been a priority, though Elizabeth would like to invest more effort toward this programming in the future.

**Student-Staff Meetings.** While students regularly meet with their peer mentors, at times they may opt to communicate larger concerns or needs with Elizabeth and/or Taylor, who they form a rapport with upon initial entrance into the program. Since Elizabeth leads the orientation and first course, she said that students generally respect her and feel comfortable with her. Elizabeth welcomes students to visit her office, though establishes boundaries, as she explained the context behind the sign on her door that lists a variety of labels, including “out for lunch,” “in a meeting,” or “come in.” During initial meetings with incoming students, Elizabeth and Taylor often hear students talk in a deficit-based manner. Taylor mentioned that many students quote psychology books when describing autism, leading her to help them create their own interpretations of autism. Additionally, a number of students discussed not communicating their own opinions.

I would say I don’t hear a lot of students’ own concerns. I hear concerns like, “my mom says if all I get is an associate’s, I won’t be able to get a job.” Or “one of my high school



teachers said an art degree doesn't mean anything." Things like that where it's not really necessarily what they think, but it's a fear that another person has instilled in them.

Elizabeth said she meets with students when they may have trouble accessing supports that are beyond the scope of peer mentors, or are experiencing challenges with faculty. She consistently navigates how to support them:

When working with autistic students, it's kind of like this tightwire walk of "how far can I push you before you lose your balance, and how much support do you need before you lose your balance, or do you just need me to leave you alone to get across and keep your eye on the rope or the tightwire?"

Meetings with students can occupy a lot of time, as Taylor described: "Some days I'll just have non-stop students showing up and I don't get any other work done." As consuming as these meetings represent, Taylor considers it her "favorite part" of the job, one that reaps rewards in seeing students' growth.

## **Chapter VI: Findings - Student Participants' Pre-College Journeys**

This next findings chapter illustrates the pre-college journeys of each autistic community college student participant. This chapter contains 13 vignettes, one for each student, illustrating their pre-college journeys, including their childhood, autism diagnosis, and paths to college. Vignettes are presented in alphabetical order. Among students whose parents I was also able to interview, I incorporate their perspectives. I start each vignette by briefly describing students' characteristics and interactions with me during the first interview to offer further context. Information on student participants is illustrated in Tables 5 and 6. Other study participants' demographics are featured in Tables 7-9. Students' autism-related characteristics are

demonstrated in Table 10, whereas their engagement across various phases of the study is shown in Table 11.

### **Andrew**

Drawing on notes from his phone as an occasional reference for responding to interview questions, Andrew, a white, straight, 18-year-old male with Asperger's and dysgraphia, spoke slowly and deliberately as we sat in a study room in the CACC office. Though he often took a long time to respond to certain questions, Andrew communicated with precision. He did not maintain much eye contact with me, often closing his eyes and rubbing his head as he processed the information. At times Andrew did not answer a few questions, leading us to proceed to the subsequent point.

Andrew's autism diagnosis represented a long time coming, as for years Rachel, his mom, tried to make sense of her young child, who lost his speech at 18 months old and experienced constant illnesses. Once Andrew was diagnosed with Asperger's at age 4, it offered clarity on his delayed development, though Rachel waited until he was 11 or 12 to explain to him his identity. "I told him that 'everyone in this world has different kinds of brains,'" Rachel described. She elaborated on this example:

You have like these amazing positive qualities that are stronger and more developed than other people with different kinds of brains. But it also gives you some areas where you're not as strong, like some of your social skills and your communication and your empathy and things like that. Those are areas that your type of brain needs to work on more and kind of challenge yourself in.

Andrew acknowledged that he did not understand Asperger's, or autism as a whole, very well growing up. However, according to Rachel, he immersed himself in books to research the

diagnosis to best understand himself. Additionally, Andrew described taking personality tests to learn about his distinct characteristics. Andrew encountered severe bullying in elementary school, as Rachel described, so much so that he experienced trauma and expressed suicidal feelings at age nine. Based on Andrew's lack of communication skills, it took her "a couple of weeks of that happening to get the whole story out of him and understand what was going on." Rachel ultimately pulled him out of school and provided him with emergency psychiatric care that supported his mental health issues. She home-schooled him on and off before Andrew landed in a positive situation: a charter school with other autistic children. Andrew performed well academically, graduating with a 4.3 GPA, Rachel said.

Upon preparing for college, Andrew explored two out-of-state universities as potential options, but his mom felt he should go to local BMCC as a means of saving money and take courses earlier in the science sequence. Additionally, BMCC featured the CACC program, which was the reason why they selected the college where Andrew should enroll. Rachel noted that one university she explored boasted an autism transition program as well, and would be a perfect place for him to transfer to. When interviewing Andrew, he did not recall that the university featured such a program. Andrew acknowledged BMCC's value in being close to home – his family relocated across states for Andrew to attend. "It was nice that I could still live with my family for two more years before I move off to the university," he said.

## **Charles**

I first met Charles, a white, straight, 42-year-old male with Asperger's, at the info session that I attended, for which he was invited as a guest speaker. Charles spoke enthusiastically about attending college, and one would think it was his first time. However, it was his "sixth rodeo" in being enrolled in college. "I have been in the exact seats that you have been sitting in," he

recalled to the students in the info session. Now he was to “pay it forward” and discuss how CACC had changed his life. Since we were unable to set up our interview in person, Charles and I communicated via Skype audio, which he preferred. Charles communicated as excitedly as when we met the week prior. He talked for long stretches and occasionally asked me if I was familiar with certain jargon he used.

Charles detailed at great length the difficulties of his childhood, from living in a divorced household marked by domestic violence to having a stepmother who sought to diagnose him with a developmental disability due to his differences. At one point, Charles said he attempted suicide due to frustrations with his family situation. After finishing high school, Charles enrolled in the U.S. Naval Academy, having always yearned to be a fighter pilot like in *Top Gun*. Within days of training he found the intensity of the situation to be too much – often having to memorize rules and phrases while exercising and eating – leading him to drop out after six weeks.

Charles attempted college on five occasions to no avail, often suffering in his academic performance and falling behind on work. During his 20s and 30s Charles considered himself to be very reclusive, often coming home from his retail position to watch television and play video games. Charles’ stepmother continued to suspect he had a developmental disability and suggested he had Asperger’s. His therapist validated this suspicion; Charles was diagnosed at age 32. This moment represented a “huge sense of relief,” as Charles shared, though he sought to have his autism “fixed.”

Monumental changes unfolded once Charles met Heather, his future wife, through a mutual friend. The two bonded over their mutual love of dogs. Charles had recently adopted one who he felt served as a wonderful mechanism for meeting new people. The two began dating and fell in love. A few years ago, Charles aimed to attempt college one more time, identifying a

cybersecurity program at BMCC of interest to him. This seemed to be the perfect opportunity for finding a career direction after continued disappointment in the retail world. “It was definitely a huge risk for him” to return to college, Heather said, especially since Charles feared that his autism-related characteristics would inhibit him from proceeding in a program.

### **Dennis**

When hosting a pizza social during my first day at CACC, in an effort to build rapport with students and enlist more participants, I met Dennis, easily identifiable because of a distinct cap he was wearing. Dennis identifies as a white, straight, 19-year-old male with ADHD and Asperger’s. He completed the demographic survey there on his laptop, and I interviewed him the following week. Before our interview, Dennis sat outside the CACC office and he talked with me about video games at length. During the interview Dennis fidgeted with his hair and twisted several lanyards layered around his neck. He later clarified to me that playing with them prevent him from engaging in biting or picking behaviors. At times Dennis stared into space, but he was concentrated on the topic at hand. Dennis consistently wears headphones, playing music, including during the interview. Occasionally Dennis stammered in communicating certain thoughts, though remained focused.

Invested in books, video games, and folklore, including Lego Bionicle, Dennis described his passions growing up as entailing immersive storytelling. School, however, had its challenges. Possessing ADHD, Dennis experienced major difficulties in staying calm and centered. He struggled with concentrating on assignments, leading him to sit “late at night crying because I couldn’t get myself to focus on the task at hand.” Dennis was not diagnosed with autism until his junior year of high school. While peering through a book in his AP psychology course, Dennis came across the term *autism*. “It’s like, ‘ah, that sounds so familiar,’” he remembered. Dennis

advocated to be tested, and he was later diagnosed as autistic, which he felt had been concealed by his strong academic performance. “I was impressed that he figured that out,” Amanda, Dennis’ mom, commented. Dennis loosely described his autism identity and considers himself “on the Asperger’s end of the autism spectrum.”

Dennis recognized that his childhood would have been easier had he been labeled as autistic and had access to accommodations that now support his concentration. Dennis’ psychologist recommended BMCC as a good college option for him. As Dennis and Amanda researched the CACC program, it seemed like an ideal fit. “The only reason I picked [BMCC] was for the [CACC] classes,” Dennis said. In particular, Dennis found the courses related to executive functioning and self-advocacy as appealing.

### **Edweena**

Edweena and I met at the front desk of BMCC’s residence hall, where she works as a Residence Assistant. She took me up to the lounge, where I conducted our interview. Twenty-one-year-old Edweena identifies as a white, lesbian, trans\* female who is autistic and has anxiety. Edweena illustrated a wide range of expressions in her face and voice. Throughout the interview she fidgeted with a stringed device she held in her hand. Edweena spoke clearly as she communicated her thoughts.

A longtime violinist, Edweena described playing her instrument as a strong passion, one that has carried her through tough times. Edweena said she was in family counseling for much of her childhood and was diagnosed with Asperger’s in fifth grade – she now identifies as autistic. The diagnosis provided clarity, as she had “legitimately thought I was making stuff up” in having challenges with misinterpretations, sensory overstimulation, and social interactions. Edweena’s mom, a fierce advocate for her daughter, helped Edweena obtain accommodations through

talking with key school administrators. Her parents gave her books to read on Asperger's, though Edweena lamented that she felt like her diagnosis was not clearly explained at the time.

Edweena took a gap year between high school and college, which she felt was necessary for her own development. During this period Edweena spent time toward researching marginalization and ableism while reconciling continued anxiety and depression. She now considers herself "proudly autistic." Edweena briefly attended another community college, but did not feel ready for college at the time. She chose to visit BMCC once her parents mentioned the college was opening a residence hall, which appealed to her. Upon visiting the campus and hearing about the CACC program, she knew she had found a good place, despite initially being resistant to attempting college again.

### **Finn**

I became acquainted with Finn, a white, straight, 19-year-old autistic male with some auditory challenges, at the pizza social. We had already set up our interview prior to this point, and he asked me a few questions about the purpose behind my research study. Finn appeared a bit nervous both at the pizza social and in the interview, held in the CACC office. He referenced how he tends to smile most of the time, perhaps out of anxiety, and did not exhibit much of a range in tone as he communicated his thoughts. At times Finn said he could not answer some of the questions I asked due to not remembering details of his life.

Finn recalled being diagnosed with autism at a young age – perhaps five or six – but was not told about being autistic until around age 10. "I didn't really consider it to be like part of who I am or anything," Finn said. "I just kind of went along with it." Finn noted his inconsistent schooling experiences, alternating between private school and home-schooling on a few occasions. Private school afforded him the opportunity to make a good friend who shared similar

interests, including animals, character design, and music. His friend also brought to Finn's attention that they were both autistic, amounting to a special connection.

Eventually the private school became overcrowded and uncomfortable, leading Finn to return to home-schooling. Finn also enrolled in the Running Start program, crediting it as a helpful pre-college experience, but could not indicate specific ways it was useful. However, through this program, he learned about CACC at BMCC, which he felt "would work well as a good start" to his college experience.

## **George**

Talking at a rapid rate, although relatively flat in tone, George warned me once we sat down in the CACC office that he would be going down "rabbit holes" due to his lack of focus. This tendency to go on long tangents unfolded during the interview, and I worked to help us maintain focus on the main topic. George identifies as a mixed-race (white and Asian) 20-year-old straight autistic male with anxiety and a visual impairment. He made strong eye contact with me throughout the interviews. George indicated that he tends to second-guess himself, illustrated by him questioning some of his own responses.

George's childhood interests varied as widely as the places he lived, as he grew up all over the world due to the nature of his father's military work. He explained his passions ranged from dinosaurs and Lego to watching the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet. Growing up George found it difficult to connect with peers' "alien" emotions and would become easily frustrated, his short fuse exploding "like a volcano." George received a number of diagnoses as a child, including oppositional defiant disorder and generalized anxiety. He concurrently obtained misdiagnoses, prompting him to feel frustrated with doctors. When life would get too intense, he would "curl up in a ball."



At 15 George received an autism diagnosis, as well as experienced “an intense traumatic event,” which he mostly described in generalities, save for framing this hospitalization-based situation as being akin to a Stephen King movie. “There are periods of my life where it’s just gone,” he said, having blocked out memories. Further complicating this period was the anxiety he faced in his international baccalaureate program in high school.

One support lay in the AVID program, which helped him prepare for college by looking up potential options. Upperclassmen told him about BMCC, which he later explored. One of George’s doctors suggested the CACC program, which seemed like a good idea, despite his nervousness in starting. Although George had been concurrently planning to apply to the local university, he “never clicked the submit button,” thus cementing his direction to pursue BMCC.

### **John**

Since we could not schedule our meeting in person, John and I held our interview via Skype video, situated in his family’s living room. During several occasions his parents walked around in the background. John is a white, straight, 19-year-old male with Asperger’s who has anxiety, ADD, depression, and OCD. He communicated with a non-expressive demeanor and voice, articulating his thoughts precisely. On a few occasions John asked for clarification on how I worded questions, and found it hard to recall dates regarding certain life events. John flicked his fingers, perhaps a form of stimming. Throughout the interview John was focused on me and spoke clearly.

Family focused, John spent much of his childhood with key figures like his mom (Pete) and grandpa. Pete shared John was bullied throughout his childhood for being “weird,” leading John to engage in confrontations as a way of releasing frustration. John said the stress often

builds up, and over the years he has gained moderating skills to control himself. He also tended to stay isolated from peers his own age, instead hanging around adults or much younger children.

John held a wide range of interests, tending to have “extreme fixation[s] on things” and rotating through obsessions. John did not remember when he was diagnosed with Asperger’s, but indicated he was “very young.” Pete recalled that the doctor “watched [John] for one hour, um, playing and doing different things, interacted with him and he said, ‘this kid's got Asperger's.’”

Pete said John never formally finished high school due to the negative environment, so she placed him in an online schooling program. “I just told him... ‘we're not gonna worry about graduating from anything. We're just going to get you college ready,’” Pete said. John’s path to BMCC was clear based on its low cost and proximity to home. Pete also works at the college. At 18 John enrolled in BMCC’s career education program, which he felt was “a very good choice on my mom’s part.” John earned both a high school degree and associate degree while enrolled at BMCC.

## **Josh**

I met Josh during the pizza social, in which he had yet to complete the demographic survey and was curious about my role in conducting the research study. He filled it out during the event, and we set up an interview, though it was after my departure from BMCC. Josh is a white, straight, 18-year-old autistic male with heart block issues. Our Skype video interview allowed me to see Josh’s range of expressions and tone. Some questions confused Josh, leading him to be unable to answer them, due to either forgetfulness or not knowing how to respond.

Akin to George, Josh grew up around the world, moving for a majority of his childhood. Josh described feeling close to relatives, commonly traveling with his cousins on vacation and

crediting his maternal grandmother for teaching him how to read. Marine biology, as a passion, fostered his curiosity, peaking when participating in an adventure camp in Florida.

Josh said that his recent autism diagnosis “wasn’t like this sort of ‘big reveal.’” Instead, “I just remember thinking, ‘Oh yeah, I guess it does make kind of sense.’ It wasn’t like a big, like earth-shattering shock.” Josh elaborated on his autism identification: “I identify as being on like the sort of like the opposite end of the spectrum sort of, because I can be very sociable, yet I don’t like social conversations. I don’t like putting myself out there.” In school Josh received various accommodations, including alternative testing locations, to help stay focused.

During high school Josh was enrolled in a college preparation program centered on life skills, which he felt were helpful and similar to what he receives in CACC today. Josh recalled first hearing about BMCC when discussing potential colleges with his parents, and determined it would make sense to select a cheaper option and transfer to a university later. The CACC program came at his parents’ recommendation.

## **Julia**

With a theatrical tone of voice - theatre representing one of her core interests - Julia apologized in advance of our interview in the CACC interview should she curse. She thanked me for selecting her to be interviewed for the study, and beamed with pride. Julie identifies as a mixed-race (Asian and white), 22-year-old bisexual female with Asperger’s, anxiety, ADD, depression, and OCD. Julia engaged in consistent eye contact with me and expressed a wide range of feelings. Her enthusiasm was also apparent when talking about her life experiences, often at a loud volume, and she only occasionally lowered her voice when offering some complaints. During the interview Julia showed me her phone, featuring pictures of herself dressed up as *Star Wars* characters.

Taking statements literally and failing to detect sarcasm were among the autism-related traits that manifested during Julia's childhood. Though she was diagnosed with Asperger's at age 8, Julia said her parents only told her about the OCD part due to the labels associated with Asperger's at the time. The "prevailing wisdom at the time was don't put a label on your child until they can do something useful with it," Julia shared. Julia's parents had her tested upon her mother (Anne) realizing she would interact with her peers differently than the other kids. The "light bulb went on for me," that she should be screened for autism, Anne said. Julia said having known about being autistic earlier "could have saved a lot of angst." Later Julia learned that her parents provided various family members with Tony Attwood's book on Asperger's to familiarize them with Julia's identity. "I didn't realize it was there because of me, but I knew that, 'okay, that's the word for people like me, I guess.' And I read the book and the things made sense to me."

Prior to starting sixth grade, in which she took a course for students with similar identities, Julia's parents disclosed her autism diagnosis. "It was very calm and like, 'okay, so this is our goal is to have the best circumstances for you to succeed,'" Julia remembered. Julia appreciated the special course, featuring aides who offered extra assistance with schoolwork.

Julia first took a tour of BMCC during her high school's college preparation day, finding it to be a good introduction to the institution. She had also become familiar with the CACC program in high school. "It made sense to, at the very least, get the required stuff out of the way in a place where I had the support that I needed."

## **Keith**

Keith identifies as a white 18-year-old male on the spectrum with anxiety. Since he forgot about our scheduled interview in the CACC office, I messaged Keith and asked about his

interest in talking via Skype instead. We communicated via the audio function, since his computer lacked a camera. Keith mumbled at times and came across as a bit frustrated in his tone of voice. For some questions he did not have answers; for others he sounded unsure. Keith talked slowly as he discussed his life experiences. As we communicated, Keith used his computer to look up a few points, including a class assignment he realized he had not submitted.

Early on his childhood Keith demonstrated a penchant for digital media artistry, attaining a scholarship to attend a special graphics program at a local university for gaming. However, his ability to participate in the program was hampered by tendencies to become easily frustrated. Having been kicked out of the program for acting out represented just one of many disappointing moments when Keith's presentations of autism inhibited opportunities. Where Keith most thrived was in settings with other students with disabilities, as his mom Daisy recalled enrolling him as a volunteer for a local community center program involving nonverbal middle schoolers.

Daisy suspected there was always something different about her son. While Keith exhibited much academic intelligence, he also demonstrated hypersensitivity. A number of appointments and tests with various doctors resulted in no diagnosis until receiving a full assessment at age 9, when he was diagnosed with autism. Keith did not recall this period due to being "a very long time" ago. He also indicated that his mom did not talk with him about autism growing up. Over time he has picked up autism-related information through individual research.

Keith, enrolled in special education programs, found these spaces to be useful in receiving individualized attention and supports. He also found the Connections program, centered on transitioning students to college, to be helpful in gaining independence skills. That said, Keith lamented consistently being placed in support programs without having much say. "I'm just doing what I'm f---ing told and have no idea [how] it's supposed to help," he shared.

He did not recall having any expectations of what college would be like, just that it would be different than high school. Keith believed he first heard about the CACC program upon nearing high school graduation. He had already toured BMCC, though did not have strong feelings about the college. Keith could not recall how his college journey began, noting he didn't know who submitted his application. "I don't know why I'm here," he said.

### **Sara Lyall**

Adorned in a raincoat with a hood for the entire interview, which I later learned stemmed from serving as a piece of comfort, Sara Lyall met me in the CACC office. Sara Lyall identifies as mixed-race (Black/African-American and white) 18-year-old asexual individual on the autism spectrum; Sara Lyall uses "she/her" pronouns, and considers herself genderqueer/gender-nonconforming. As Sara Lyall talked, she rubbed her hands, and was focused on me. Sara Lyall appeared calm and comfortable as she communicated, speaking at a fair pace. Though Sara Lyall communicated quietly, when she became excited about certain points, she would raise her volume and talk faster.

Sara Lyall described her upbringing as being marked by having wonderful parents who offer much support, value her input, and raised her to think independently. Dogs and dinosaurs constituted her primary interests. "Most four-year-olds don't even know what a paleontologist is, but I wanted to be one," she remarked. Unfortunately, her dinosaur fervor faded once she attended a natural history museum summer camp, in which she had not learned anything new about the extinct creatures. Later, in high school, she participated in the theatre program, which engendered feelings of community and helped in understanding body language, always a challenge. The setting's sensory overload led her to feel overwhelmed, though. She considered

high school a “sensory nightmare and I was sleep deprived for all four years of it.” Sara Lyall’s introverted nature has prompted her to “charge” her “social battery” once she returns home.

Diagnosed with autism at 16, at her therapist’s recommendation, Sara Lyall said this news did not come as much of a surprise, as “we’d always know I was atypical.” Sara Lyall never considered herself “normal” and felt like, ““oh, okay. That explains a lot.”” While she had interacted with a few autistic individuals in the past, she did not resonate with their manifestations of autism.

Sara Lyall’s mom assisted her with preparing for college and understanding how to handle application procedures:

there was a lot of going to the website and trying to figure out how I was supposed to apply and going, I don't know what I'm doing. My mom's like, “Oh, it says right here,” and I'm like, “yeah, but what am I supposed to do?”

Though she applied to a few universities and was accepted into one of them, Sara Lyall decided to start her college journey at BMCC because of the CACC program, which her parents had discovered. Upon exploring CACC, Sara Lyall thought it was worth enrolling in.

## **Stephen**

Stephen identifies as a white, straight, 25-year-old with Asperger’s, ADD, depression, and “maybe anxiety.” I interviewed Stephen in the CACC office. He did not seem to want to engage in pleasantries, so I went straight to the interview questions. Stephen talked at a measured rate throughout and did not demonstrate a range of facial expressions, appearing rather flat. At times Stephen shared brief answers with little elaboration.

As a child, Stephen explained he lacked good social skills. “I did behave at times in ways that looking back and I’m like, ‘oh yeah, that’s kind of embarrassing.’” Stephen said he did not

remember many details behind being diagnosed with autism at age 8 other than it being “tentative or might change.” He was concurrently “diagnosed with ADD or ADHD.” Stephen described feeling “iffy” on whether he, in fact, is autistic. “I don't really necessarily feel like I'm on the spectrum especially well, especially ‘cause you know, it's kind of a collection of different things put into one thing,” Stephen shared. He added that there is a lot of “unnecessary labeling” regarding disabilities.

BMCC did not represent Stephen's initial college experience. He had attempted college on two other occasions. He had been facing depression and “complications with [his] personal life” prior to moving to the city near where BMCC is located. “After a little bit of doing a little bit of work here and there kind of in adjusting to [city], I decided to look into colleges in the [city] area again,” Stephen said. He selected BMCC because of the CACC program.

### **Thrawn**

Akin to several other participants, I met Thrawn (who picked his pseudonym based on a favorite *Star Wars* book character) at the pizza social, in which he was one of the most talkative individuals in attendance. He communicated with great enthusiasm and range of voice, also illustrated during our Skype video interview. Thrawn identifies as a mixed-race (Hispanic/Latinx and white) 20-year-old autistic, bisexual with many disabilities, including anxiety, depression, and dysgraphia. He stayed on target with most of the conversation points, though his eyes wandered, not always looking at the screen. He was as expressive as when I met him in person, and often incorporated much humor into his remarks. Thrawn offered a brief tour of his bedroom once he discovered his pet bearded dragon hiding behind a pillow. For several minutes during our interview Thrawn's bearded dragon rested on his shoulder.



Depression defined much of Thrawn's upbringing, in which his businessmen parents – who he compared to the “sharks” on the *Shark Tank* television series – were often absent from his life. Teachers represented Thrawn's mentor figures, and he was particularly shaped by one of his favorite instructors who suffered from a chronic illness. Having contemplated suicide, Thrawn said his favorite teacher's lambasting of another teacher's unit on doctor-assisted suicide changed his perspective on ever taking his own life.

“When I first heard about [autism] I was super relieved because it's like ‘this is me. This fulfills every single one of the criteria and things that I have to struggle with,’” Thrawn said. Once diagnosed, “I took that time of revelation and went overboard with it,” Thrawn described. “I would research my condition, research all the intricacies of it, and work out ways to compensate for them.”

Upon exploring colleges, he applied to several institutions, including BMCC. However, Thrawn decided to start at a local university. Unfortunately, while living in his dormitory, Thrawn was exposed to a chemical leak in his room that caused severe sickness. Challenging courses and ongoing depression exacerbated the situation, prompting Thrawn to leave the university and instead head to BMCC, where some of his friends had already enrolled.

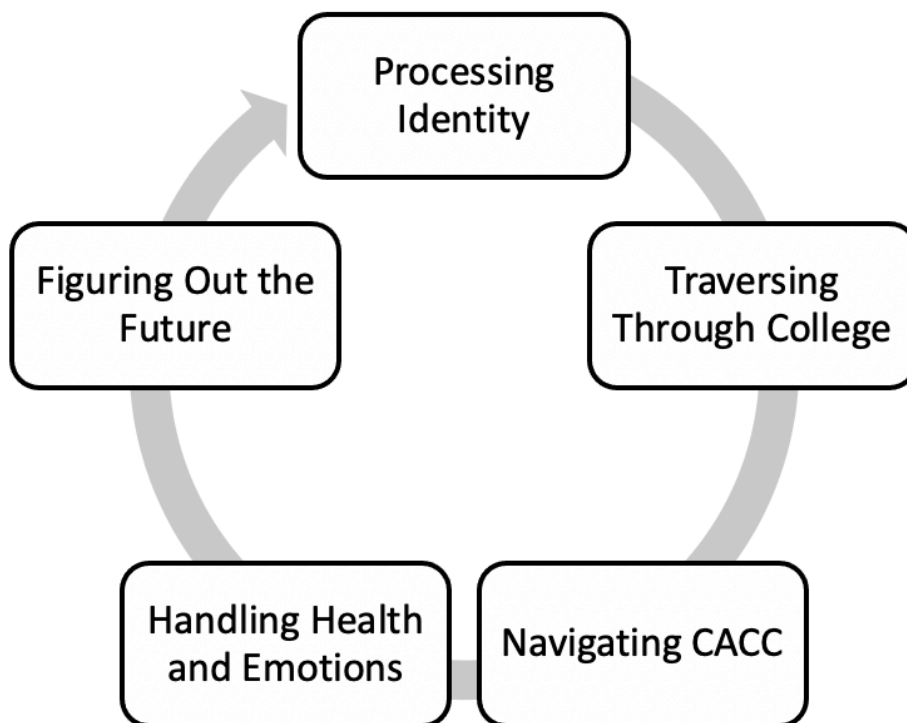
### **Chapter VII: Findings – Steering Through the College Experience**

This third and most comprehensive findings chapter uncovers five primary themes that autistic community college students experience in navigating higher education. This cyclical process of self-discovery is illustrated in Figure 3. Each of these themes encompasses a subsection of the following components within the findings. Meanwhile, Figure 4 illustrates all of the main factors that play into students' experiences across three phases: pre-college; college experience; and the future. The figure demonstrates two halves, with the top half showcasing

their personal development and the bottom half depicting their academic and professional development. The main individuals influencing their lives are featured in rectangles; processes that shape experiences are featured in wavy rectangles; the primary theory in a cloud; and the CACC program in a circle. The closer any individual item exists to the timeline demonstrates the strength or relevance of those attributes or individuals to their lives. Consequently, Figure 4 distills the findings most concisely and cohesively.

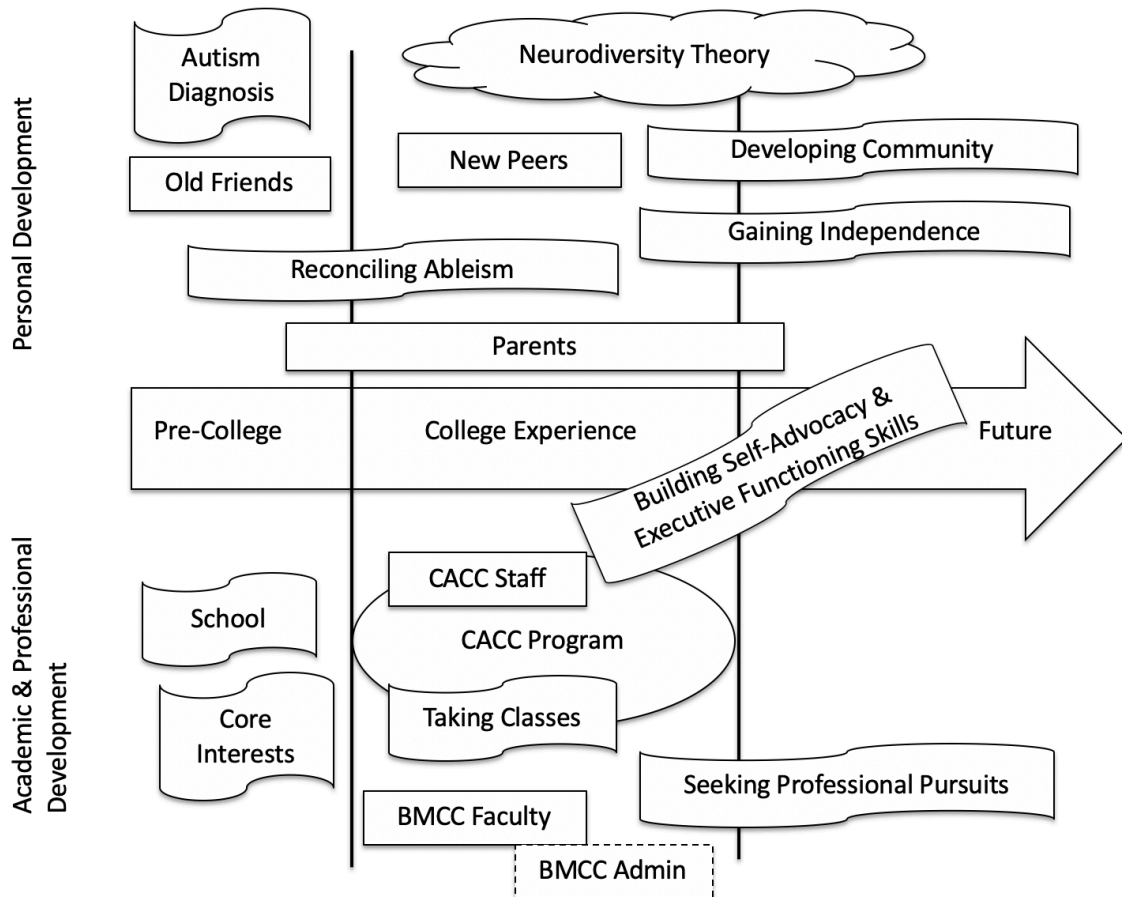
**Figure 3.**

*Processes Students Experience in Navigating College*



**Figure 4.**

*Factors Influencing Autistic Students' Lives and Educational Experiences*



### **Processing Identity**

College represents a time of self-discovery and personal growth for incoming students. Such blossoming is often accompanied by questioning oneself, negotiating life circumstances, and determining how to forge ahead. The first main theme of the findings highlights how students process their identities as autistic people. By addressing how campus stakeholders (including autistic students, most notably) recognize and reconcile internalized ableism, complemented by sharing how students handle disclosure of identities and obtain

accommodations, we can better interpret the foundational component of identity influencing autistic students' community college experiences.

### ***Recognizing and Reconciling Internalized Ableism***

The first sub-theme acknowledges how campus stakeholders, and students themselves, make sense of the pervasiveness of deficit-based views of autism. Students' internalized ableism has carried throughout their childhood and into adulthood. Hence, their exposure to operationalizing this term signals a change in how they see themselves and the world they inhabit.

Throughout their lives, autistic individuals have been subjected to deficit-based perspectives of autism, often reinforced through societal norms and language. As study participants illustrated – including both autistic college students and neurotypical individuals – this messaging is harmful and distortive. Even well-meaning people, such as autistic students' parents, are not free from perpetuating negative views. Elizabeth shared some of her concerning interactions with parents.

It never ceases to amaze me what parents are telling their students on a regular basis. I mean, this is an extreme example of it, but many parents have a strongly held belief that their students cannot do anything when really they're quite capable.

A few parents' quotes reflect this point. Anne described that her daughter Julia acts “pretty normal,” though a “big hole in the road” may dismantle her ability to go about her day. Rachel said her son Andrew went to a school that “catered to functioning kids with different disabilities.”

Throughout the study, I positioned students' statements and perspectives against their parents (assuming they were also interviewed and students nominated them) to determine the

level of alignment in their interpretations of events. When it came to the topic of ableism, both parent and child often held similarly harmful perceptions, as the messaging parents used often carried down to how their children processed autistic identities. This prompted a domino effect of ableism. Julia referred to some peers who talk “like computers... not exactly like, ‘Oh, this person sounds like a robot,’ but like it feels sometimes like people are working on preprogrammed phrases that may or may not be quite right.” Stephen, who questioned his own autism-based affiliation due to being diagnosed many years ago as a child, expressed that “some of the stuff with autism spectrum and whatnot just seems kind of a bit too inaccurate to really be spoken about as confidently as it is.”

Students also prescribed to notions around functionality. John said that his “mom has devoted a significant amount of her time to making me more functional.” “If you have one gear that's irregular like myself, the person operating the machine has to take the gear and they have to put energy into making sure that it works in sync with the others,” John described.

Thrawn indicated “there's a pretty big line between, you know, high-functioning autists who can keep themselves relatively calm and what neurotypicals think is... high-functioning autism.” These interpretations illustrate how students see a range of autistic manifestations stemming from societal portrayals, both in what is considered socially acceptable and unacceptable.

Undeniably students' upbringings are often the root of these harmful interpretations. Frannie said she “think[s] a lot of autistic people spend their K-12 experience being told that they're wrong and doing it wrong and not smart because they don't fit as a square peg in a round hole.” Taylor echoed this point, saying that when autistic students enter CACC, they “basically just quote psychology books,” but with more knowledge about autism identities, “they will be

the first one to passionately debate with people that quote psychology books about autism.” She expanded:

So I would say it starts out really clinical, and they’ll be like, “oh, I have social troubles,” and then by the end of the program, you know, they’ll say things like, “oh, I prefer to, you know, communicate by texting. Can we communicate by text?” Or things like that where it’s more advocating for parts of them, instead of quoting, you know, what their doctors have said or what their parents have said about them, and that they have held to be true.

At times students have wrestled with their identities, wishing they were not autistic. Charles’ story aptly captures the struggles associated with obtaining the diagnosis.

I was trying to cure my autism. So it's like “I have my cancer diagnosis now, let's treat the cancer, let's get the chemo going, let's get the radiation therapy going.” That's the way that I looked at it. It wasn't like, “oh my God, I'm so happy I'm autistic,” but it was, “I finally have a diagnosis. That makes sense. So now the treatment will finally work.” ... I remember telling people that I would give like a kidney to stop being autistic.

Elizabeth and Taylor said they, too, have been viewed in a negative light due to their neurodivergent identities. Taylor shared she once encountered a medical professional who did not think that women could have autism. Gender disparities in diagnoses reinforce misunderstandings, as Julia illustrated “the greater institutional problem of girls not getting diagnosed” also means many research studies focus exclusively on male students.

Elizabeth explained how CACC students who struggle “have heard so many negative messages that they have a hard time thinking these other ways.” Since society tends to set cultural expectations about how people act and behave, autistic individuals are prompted to

conform to particular standards viewed as acceptable. Hence, judgments emerge if autistic people do not stick to the status quo. “That's insulting and demoralizing and dehumanizing to be told like ‘you need to change your tone of voice if you want to fit in,’” she shared. Frannie shared that Elizabeth “feels like society puts a burden on autistic people to socialize in a neurotypical way and she very much doesn't want to have this program be that way at all.”

Students learn about one component of CACC’s philosophy from the onset: autistic people should not need to entirely change to fit in with society, and that society should be more flexible and adaptive, too. John echoed this point, indicating that he has learned that although autistic people must work “to improve themselves and to make themselves more functional to the best of their abilities, to their capabilities, society also needs to step up and make their work environments more disabled person friendly as well.” While this reflection reinforces the negative *functionality* thread, John’s comment showed how both neurodivergent and neurotypical people must adapt. He also mentioned in his written reflections that he “appreciated that the program didn’t view me as broken and in need of fixing, since pretty much everyone else in the world does.” As Grace framed it, students should embrace “the reality that the environment disables someone.” She continued that “someone is not inherently carrying disability. They're disabled by the environment.”

Students shared that, through CACC participation, they have learned about internalized ableism and how society uses ableist language. Josh said he made statements “that could be perceived as insensitive without even realizing it.” He added that “I've come much more around to (Elizabeth's) view, but at the time my view was, ‘great, I'm autistic. How do we fix the autism now?’” Josh reflected that he has long aimed to blend into society, leading him to have “adopted a lot of neurotypical, ableist mindsets and behaviors that I have to... go through and eradicate.”

Similarly, George identified that, until recently, he had been using harmful terms regarding functionality. At the same time, even through program engagement, students illustrated instances of internalized ableism. Overcoming this self-negativity is an iterative process, as John said.

Probably the very first step in order to become a functional autistic person is to be fully okay with the fact that you are different and you will always be different. You need to accept it. You definitely need to work on it, but it's not something to be ashamed of.

Julia possessed similar thoughts, commenting “the more ways I can be acceptable, the more leeway I have for the ways that I'm not.” She recognized that she desired to be “regular,” despite CACC’s intention of having students avoid falling into normalcy traps. Keith, one of the student participants who exhibited the most salient presentations of depression and frustration with life, continued to see himself as a problem: “I don't know what's f---ing wrong with me.” Altogether students’ stories show the program addresses internalized ableism, the degree to which students have altered their prior ways of thinking may be moderated by other life experiences. They may also enact ableism in how they interact with other autistic people, as described later in the findings.

Figure 5 illustrates the ableist cycle that often unfolds for autistic people, demonstrating how the CACC program acts as a filter that may change students’ conceptions of ableism. I created this figure to showcase four notable phases represented in the data. As shown, the first phase begins with historic examples of society perpetuating ableism in the discourse. Next, parents process this harmful messaging and may propagate this discourse. Later autistic people internalize ableism by communicating about themselves in deficit-based ways. Concurrently CACC works to counteract these trends through explicitly operationalizing students’ messaging as ableist. Finally, autistic individuals may engage in one of three paths: 1) enacting ableist



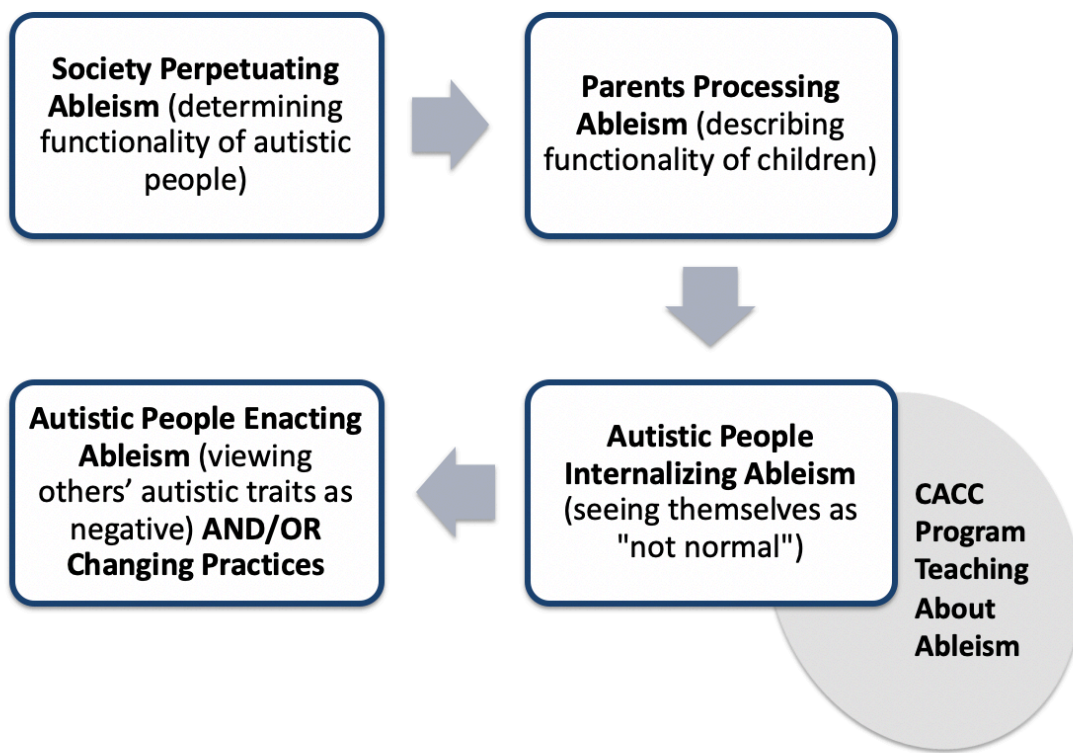
messaging onto other disabled people; 2) dismantling their own ableist practices; or 3) reconciling ableism through both perpetuating such messaging and aiming to quash ableist communication/internalization concurrently.

***Handling Autism Disclosure: “It’s Not Like the Disclosure Just Comes Naturally”***

Sharing with other people about a non-apparent identity represents a deeply personal and individualized process, as autistic students described. Context, emotions, location, and people involved all account for factors that may influence students to disclose their autistic identities, or keep it to themselves. As illustrated in students’ stories, no one situation is alike.

**Figure 5.**

*Ableism Cycle*



Charles, for one, realized that he needed to share his autism affiliation as a mechanism for having students understand him. He credited CACC as providing him with the language and confidence for shaping the script.

I needed to stand up in front of a bunch of people. I still really know all that well, who didn't know I was autistic and basically say, "Hey, my name is [Charles]. I think you should consider me for, you know, being promoted in the company because I'm really good with computers. Part of the reason why I'm so good is I'm autistic. I naturally think like a computer," and I got up in front of the class and did that. That was incredibly stressful. So it's not like the disclosure just comes naturally and easily to me at this point.

But I never could have done that without [the CACC] program.

His approach of being proud and open about his autism identity variably changed from when he was first diagnosed, as earlier demonstrated. Initially Charles said he viewed the situation as "what can I do to cheat it, to hide it? How can I behave more like a neurotypical person?"

Versus now it's, "this is who I am. Deal with it." Similarly, Dennis transparently shared his autism identity, using course online discussion boards or in-person introductions as disclosure opportunities. Thankfully, disclosure does not generate too much spotlighting. "They're like, 'okay,' and we move on," he shared. Prior to participating in CACC, Finn had to advocate more in discussing his autism identity, but being part of the program has eased the process.

Whereas some students more directly discussed autism, others only mentioned it if necessary. Interestingly, all three female autistic student participants addressed the subject more quietly. Edweena follows a more subtle tactic by incorporating her identity into conversations with faculty when sharing her classroom needs. Similarly, Julia avoids "making a big deal out of it," only mentioning to faculty that she is autistic if it becomes relevant. "I don't run around

yelling ‘I’m autistic, mother----er’ at random strangers,” she joked. Sara Lyall said she submits accommodation requests, yet does not directly talk about her autism affiliation.

A few students avoid talking about autism entirely outside of the CACC community. George said he does not share this fact with other students, saying that “it usually just spreads like wildfire” and does not always have positive connotations. He described that neurotypical peers are generally surprised to hear about his autistic identity. Likewise, Stephen did not indicate he has talked about his identity with the neurotypical community. Since some disclosure-related questions were limited to the second interview, a few students like Josh and Thrawn, who did not participate in this component, did not have the opportunity to communicate their experiences in disclosing autism to other people.

### **Traversing Through College**

This second theme highlights core components of what defines students’ college experiences upon pursuing higher education, albeit from the neurodivergent standpoint. These subthemes include approaching their academics, processing general course challenges, obtaining accommodations, discovering potential majors and careers that may stem from their (hyper)interests, identifying and seizing professional prospects, and determining how involved their parents should be in their college experience. While some aspects of the CACC program factor into particular components of how students confront college, CACC’s more salient role emerges in the third theme regarding how students navigate the program in particular.

### ***Approaching Academics***

Upon interviewing and observing students, as well as gathering written reflections from them, I identified four components that captured how they explained their academic experiences (outside of their interests across their respective majors, illustrated later). Students commonly

viewed academics as encompassing the main reason for why they were attending college and often placed much of their energy in this domain. They experienced triumphs and tribulations in their academic engagement, much like their neurotypical peers, though faced the added layer of dealing with additional disabilities, distractions, and difficulties that occasionally hindered their progression.

**Studying Challenges and Strategies.** Though not every student directly addressed their level of engagement with studying, the vast majority expressed not studying course content due to lacking interest, having challenges concentrating, or not having identified helpful habits. Their stories shed light on the prominence of executive functioning differences – discussed in depth in the third theme – as barriers.

For example, Dennis joked when talking about studying: “What are study habits?” He said he never developed studying techniques, instead aiming to remember content the first time he learns about it. Despite not studying, he indicated academic performance has not been severely hindered. During his peer mentor meeting, Dennis was asked how he prepares for finals. “I just kind of brace myself.” Accordingly, Dennis’ mentor recommended he utilize his professor’s study guides and office hours to further understand content, as well as work on course assignments earlier. While Dennis said he was amenable to the suggestions, he mentioned in a subsequent interview that level of interest in course content dictated his level of engagement.

Other students face similar challenges with studying. Outside of taking notes as he reads a textbook, Andrew said he does not study the material thereafter. Sara Lyall said she does not “have to actively study at all.” By paying attention in class and handling homework, “I still get good grades.” Sara Lyall credited her ability to “retain vast amounts of information” as aiding her academic success. John’s mom Pete said his application of study habits to be “rocky, but

that's a motivational issue," contingent on his interest in the topic. Anne, Julia's mom, said Julia "hadn't really realized that you could work on assignments before they were due," though did not explain if or how Julia was changing her habits.

On the other hand, a few autistic students shared useful studying techniques that support their focus. Channeling her passion for music, Edweena and her friends stage "listening parties" as they study course content. While writing a final course paper, she relied on several cups of coffee to craft a 2,400-word paper under three hours. "It was one of the best papers I ever wrote," she remarked. Josh had crafted note cards to study for an exam, sharing his process with his peer mentor, but expressed frustration of leaving it "down to the wire" in creating the cards due to prioritizing family commitments.

Students discussed the physical environment they occupied as influencing their willingness to study. Finn recently reorganized his bedroom to focus on homework. Sara Lyall enjoyed working in a common area on campus. Dennis, who illustrated reluctance in studying, lamented that "the ideal solution would be to go to like the library and do work there," but its closure due to the Coronavirus outbreak limited him from using that outlet.

These experiences demonstrate students' varied processes of determining viable study habits, lest they value engaging in techniques. The CACC program, as described later, works to help students on enhancing executive functioning challenges related to concentration and task initiation, as these have a ripple effect on study habits.

**Faculty Accessibility and Connection.** Students' levels of connection to their instructors shaped how they made sense of their course experiences. Though not all students talked about their faculty, particularly since this was more of a focal point in the second interview – by which

point three students had dropped out of the study – most had favorable opinions about how instructors supported their classroom success.

Instructors making themselves accessible to students is key to feeling welcomed and valued, as several students described. One of Finn’s instructors said to him that “he could talk to her about anything.” When feeling down one day, after class, she walked Finn over to the campus counseling center. George considered instructors to be “like an aunt or an uncle” who he could talk with about “all kinds of things” because “they’re human.” Instructors who individualize their approaches with students, as opposed to create “a template for one size fits all,” make students feel like they can turn to them for support, George said. John valued how his instructors have been empathetic in modifying course assignments to reduce anxiety.

Feeling kinship with instructors also derived from possessing the same interests. Thrawn exclaimed that his professors in his science courses, including marine biology and astronomy, have been huge supports. “I could gush about them for another 30 minutes,” he said. Instructors’ explanations of concepts in an easy-to-understand manner also resonated with a few students. Sara Lyall said that her math instructor’s directness allowed for simple comprehension. George felt his English instructor’s explanations of concepts worked for him, leading him to frequently utilize her office hours. Throughout my conversations with students, they identified teaching techniques that support and hinder their success; see Table 12 for more details.

**Addressing Group Work.** CACC instructors discussed the challenges associated with designing group work that benefited student learning, both individually and collectively, while concurrently relaying important concepts. Through directly talking about working styles and group dynamics, Jake said his students learn about “how they actually work together and what people are contributing a discussion.” This more meta form of learning clicks with students,

though mixing up groups across class sessions sometimes causes frustration, as Jake detailed. Students also sometimes find working in pairs for final projects to be difficult, as they must identify strengths and areas of interest to divvy up responsibilities, as well as work in tandem to create a cohesive project.

CACC courses' intentional efforts to encourage students to work together have drawn mixed feelings, ranging from frustration and concern, to acceptance and understanding. Heather (Charles' wife) said "his biggest stress is group work." She explained that Charles is often "wrestling with not to take over and not wanting to make anybody else feel bad, but at the same time, he's like, 'I don't want to get a bad grade either.'" Concerns with peers negatively impacting academic performance resonated with Andrew, too, who tended to shoulder more of the workload in past group projects. As a counterpoint, though, Andrew found his executive functioning course final presentation partner to be a good collaborator. He wrote in his written reflections that "I might offer to become his friend if I get more free time." Upon following up with Andrew on this reflection, he said that he had yet to reach out, but found his peer likeable. Dennis, also in the same course, said he developed the project slideshow, whereas his partner conducted research, allowing Dennis to avoid engaging in the research side that he dislikes. Josh worried that his procrastination tendencies would hinder his groupmates. "There are times when that part wins and I end up realizing I've gotten off task and I've left my group members to pick up the slack," he shared. George, while not a fan of group work, recognized it's "a required skill that people need to learn."

Engaging in peer review, as a type of group work, has frustrated John and Julia. John, when looking over his peers' papers, tended to give many detailed comments, since he seeks that level of feedback. He sadly shared that this tactic is not always reciprocated. Julia said

workshopping short stories lead her to be “TERRIFIED, and kind of confused and conflicted and frustrated,” as she wrote in her reflections. “I am just the fundamentally broken person who can't really deal with criticism very well,” she said, once I followed up with her via an interview. “Like I can keep my mouth shut and not react, but that's about as far as it goes.” Part of her anxiety stemmed from fearing that her peers would dislike what she wrote. Ultimately Julia ended up dropping the course.

Sara Lyall, meanwhile, provide a counternarrative to other autistic student participants, noting she did not mind group work. In her geology course, Sara Lyall found comfort in engaging with her informal table group, comprising the same people across every class session.

I witnessed students' engagement in group work, albeit during a limited time, when observing Grace's executive functioning course section. Whereas some groups featured students talking with one another, others sat by themselves on their laptops. A vast majority of students did not listen to the instructor's direct requests to form groups. Some half of students did not talk with their peers. These patterns illustrated the inconsistencies in how students addressed group work.

### ***Processing General Course Challenges***

A variety of academic challenges inhibit students' focus, momentum, and investment in their coursework. Data from autistic students, as well as the people they nominated, pinpoint four common themes that serve as obstacles: missing due dates, lacking clarity on assignments, experiencing trauma within the curriculum, and struggling in online courses. These challenges may bear larger consequences, including dropping out of courses and taking a break from college.



**Missing Due Dates.** Autistic students' differences associated with executive functioning – addressed by CACC via multiple forms of programming, as described later – contributed to often missing assignments' due dates and thus hurting their academic performance. Several examples give context to what students experience.

Peer mentor meetings have offered a space for a few students to talk through due dates with their mentors, who can use an electronic system to alert them of impending tasks. During Stephen's observation, his peer mentor Reina asked him if he had missed any recent assignments. Stephen explained that he did not complete one of his assignments based on its due date late at night. He had also forgotten to complete some of his weekly journal entries. This led Reina to ask if he needed clarification on anything, to which Stephen said, "no." Meanwhile, during Dennis' observation, upon being asked about upcoming assignments, he realized he had one due that night. Dennis' mentor Nini asked if he needed a reminder, and he indicated he did not, due to its urgency. "My priority is always going to be what's coming up, not what's past due," Dennis said. At his peer mentor meeting, George reviewed his assignments on Canvas, a common task. He said that he had missed a quiz due the prior day. George quietly sighed and said he was going to complete the overdue quiz, perhaps to receive some credit. He removed his notebook from his backpack, reviewing notes as he filled out the questions, occasionally mumbling to himself.

Across interviews, students also discussed their challenges with missing assignments. When taking courses requiring online textbooks, Josh said he had paid for them later in the term, having missed due dates for assignments. "I was already working at a pretty big deficit" by the time he had textbook access, Josh said. Charles had missed a quarter of course material for one

of his courses where he lacked motivation. Collectively time management and interest levels played key roles in missing due dates.

**Lacking Clarity on Assignments.** For several students, written assignments' open-ended nature has provided barriers. Keith, when asked to reflect on how a Ted Talk related to him, said he had no reaction to it and could not complete the essay. Meanwhile, Andrew disliked written assignments with minimum word counts. "It's hard to try and come up with something original to say" without repeating oneself, he said. Sara Lyall, who considers herself "very literal minded," said she fears having to write an essay on a book's symbolism in future English courses. "There's a level of in-depth analysis that goes deeper than I really see," she said. "It's like trying to look into a dark cave with a flashlight and just being like, 'Oh, blackness.'" Elizabeth described how Thrawn finds course content challenging when he cannot obtain immediate feedback on the accuracy of his answers. Heather said Charles struggles with when he cannot understand the instructor's intentions, tending to overthink the situation and become overstressed:

That can be really frustrating when the teacher doesn't get back to [Charles] because that can be the difference with him spending five hours on a project instead of half an hour to an hour because he's thinking that they're wanting all of this extra stuff.

Meanwhile, Andrew has disliked tests with vague questions and multiple-choice answers because he becomes caught up over how they are worded. He explained how a recent psychology test asked students to define the word *attitude*, prompting confusion over how some of the possible choices offered information about, yet not definitions for, the term. Sara Lyall has also found tests to be tricky because she needs to learn to trust her instincts: "Sometimes I will answer something and then overthink it and then go back and change the answer, and it turns out

my first answer was correct. And that tends to get me on testing more than anything else.” Here we recognize the prominence of ambiguity in complicating students’ academics.

**Experiencing Trauma within the Curriculum.** Course content sometimes leads students to reflect on negative life events. According to Elizabeth, George struggled with an English course where he was asked to reflect on family memories. “That just put him over the edge and his whole English course that quarter was all of these introspective things,” she said. As a result, the triggering material has served as a “roadblock” for George to maintain his focus. Other CACC students, many of whom had participated in traumatic, deficit-based social skills courses in the past, have anxiety in discussing social interactions in CACC courses, as Ellen shared. Dennis also experienced trauma in an English course upon reading an essay “that opened an existential can of worms.” The reading, centered on the isolation of humans and the Earth within the universe, was “terrifying,” leading him to be unable to sleep for a while thereafter. Unfortunately pinpointing and preventing past trauma is not a straightforward process, leading each student to navigate potential barriers that may arise in their own way.

**Struggling in Online Courses.** Without being able to interact with individuals in person and focus on just the instructor in a classroom setting, students have expressed their general distaste for online courses. Dennis concisely said that “all online math does not work for me.” Lacking concentration in a non-academic environment harmed his learning. Keith found an online photography course, which he was beginning to take during the time of our second interview when the Coronavirus outbreak hit, to be unsuitable for him. “There’s nothing to photograph,” he said. “I can’t go out and take pictures during the quarantine.” Edweena has found online courses to be “really overwhelming.” Sometimes synchronous components of such courses result in weird sounds or images coming through. “It just makes for like a display of

something that just feels so outside of the realm of what we would consider an institutional learning environment,” she said. Julia has entirely avoided online courses because of finding past hybrid courses to impede her learning. Sara Lyall said her procrastination tendencies emerge more saliently when not in a physical learning environment. Clearly online courses afford flexibility, but also a lack of structured learning for some students.

**Dropping Out of Courses and Taking a Break from College.** Keith, in his first year at BMCC, had yet to complete any college courses outside of CACC courses. Through talking with Keith and his mother Daisy, as well as observing his peer mentor meeting (with Elizabeth, temporarily taking over), it became instantly clear that Keith’s frustrations with one component of a course could completely derail him from persisting. With a sign language course, he could not understand the instructors. In sociology, he had trouble with the course content and was encouraged to use a tutor, who he felt did not know the subject matter. Starting photography, he felt the online format would not be conducive to completing assignments. He also said he could not stay focused watching videos. “I’m convinced there isn’t a class I can do,” he shared. Keith complained that his family and college staff’s recommendations of trying to take different courses are useless. “Nothing is working and they insist that it is all isolated incidents,” he said. Daisy shared how again and again Keith has felt each attempted course has been too overwhelming or frustrating. She reasoned that “maybe if he can successfully complete a course, he might feel more comfortable with implementing other strategies to different courses that he finds a challenge.”

While most autistic student participants had not experienced issues with dropping courses like Keith, a few were questioning the merits of staying in college entirely. Thrawn, who

had felt he learned more from his job and saw promise in pursuing – described in detail later – was in the process of considering dropping out of BMCC when I interviewed him.

With this kind of academic system, I'm forced to take these kinds of courses that I do not need, do not want, and really can't handle another time. And worse, they've been preventing me from actually achieving the opportunities and dreams that I want to do now that are available to me.

Elizabeth acknowledged that some students realize that college, and taking courses related to a potential field of interest, is not the right space for them, though this is nothing to be ashamed of. She reflected on her own personal experiences in never having graduated from college, but still finding her path, as an example of how life works out.

Julia, meanwhile, decided to take a break from college, during the term following our first interview, upon feeling her mental health had been suffering and fearing her academic performance would be hampered. In her written reflections Julia noted she was experiencing multiple panic attacks, concentration issues, and “random breakdowns.” “I knew that I was going to need a lot longer to recover or else the next [term] would just be a repeat as the [previous] one,” she said during our second interview. I asked Julia if she would return the following term, and she said she was uncomfortable committing one way or another at that point. The Coronavirus pandemic, as detailed at the end of the findings, amounted to additional complications.

### ***Obtaining Accommodations***

Should autistic students feel comfortable in discussing their diagnoses, or reach a point where they cannot be successful in academia without receiving additional assistance, they may have their first encounters with the DSO. The DSO represents the main mechanism for how

students obtain accommodations, though campus staff hold mixed feelings of the office. Wonder expressed frustration over how the DSO works with students. The office “does not seem to acknowledge the unique challenges that can come with an autistic student,” she lamented. “And, in fact, I think sometimes it's harmful.” She intimated that the DSO faces an overwhelming number of students they serve, causing autistic students to be “falling through the cracks.” Mackenzie possessed similar sentiments, contending the DSO does not know what students’ distinct needs entail. Kelsey, who works in the campus residential hall, explained how the DSO does not always communicate well with other campus units. Autistic students also shared their issues with the DSO. Among the complaints, Dennis found its structure to be confusing, Edweena bemoaned never receiving an accommodation she was promised, and Finn was disappointed in note-takers’ lack of reliability.

Communicating messages about valuing students with disabilities and following a social justice framework, the DSO website appears strength-based at the surface level. Where it differs from CACC, though, lies in its intention to integrate disabled students into society, drawing on deficit-based language to make these points. The medical and legal content illustrated on the website, particularly in how students are asked to present documentation of their disabilities, accentuated this tone. This approach diverged from CACC’s website, which explicitly mentioned how autistic students “do not need to provide... documentation of [their] disability.” Despite this variation in philosophy and practice, CACC states on its website that it “highly recommends” autistic students register with the DSO and receive necessary accommodations. CACC’s website also possesses recommendations regarding how faculty can help students seeking accommodations.

CACC advocates that students share with faculty members on how they can be most successful in courses. Whether or not students engage in these strategies harken back to their comfort in disclosing autistic identities and knowing how to share their needs. Some needs exist in the form of accommodations, whereas others are informal supports.

Andrew said he had trouble understanding his peers' accents during group discussions, leading him to ask to talk with his professor instead, amenable to that request. Dennis shared that since he has a "track record of writing emails that have been considered kind of harsh or rude," each semester he sends instructors an email to let him know if he ever writes a message that they consider uncomfortable. George aims to develop a rapport with his instructors and let them know about his needs. John, while taking a public speaking course, approached his instructor to inform him of his anxiety in talking in large groups. He obtained an alternative means of delivering his presentation. That said, a few students, including Sara Lyall and Stephen, said they do not talk with their instructors.

Autistic students' accommodations ranged in frequency and quality. One common thread was the popularity of testing accommodations, whether in the form of alternative testing locations (David, George, Josh, Sara Lyall) or extended test time (Finn, George, John, Julia). John articulated the value of extended test time: "I have a compulsion to look over my test at least four times to make sure I got every last little detail right... there is really no middle ground where I compromise on both neatness and on time efficiency."

A few students obtained unique accommodations that enhanced their learning. Dennis, for one, is allowed to listen to music during tests. "The way I describe it is [listening to music] gives the part of me that doesn't enjoy concentrating something to do, so that the rest of me can actually be productive," he explained. Andrew can work on group projects individually. Keith

can take breaks from class, stepping out when needed. Most CACC students use priority registration and find this tool to be effective in planning courses. In sum, it appeared from talking with students that accommodation usage depended on context, varied needs, and their capacity to focus on tasks at hand.

### *Capitalizing on Hyperinterests*

Students' extreme interests, or hyperinterests, many of them stemming from childhood, have represented both major sources of joy and could potentially lead to channeling knowledge and skillsets into careers. Several CACC staff and BMCC staff discussed the value of students' hyperinterests. Nigel said autistic students "may be an expert in a particular area." These deep areas of knowledge and enthusiasm, as Elizabeth described, make "autistic people fascinating to talk to when you get a conversation going." Frannie echoed this point, commenting that "the more someone shares with you about their general interest, the more you can kind of gauge who they are as a person." Consequently, in their courses, autistic students may immerse themselves in content, Taylor said. The CACC website also exemplifies students' interests, as a fact sheet on autistic college students indicated that they may have "energetic participation" in courses.

**Finding Common Passions.** CACC's orientation represents a key venue where students pinpoint shared interests, as Thrawn described. "People would start gushing about their favorite topics... and a lot of these were underground, you know, nerdy things that are shared by lots of people... more than I can possibly imagine," he remarked. Such common ties enable CACC students to connect. Elizabeth and Taylor see the possibilities of leveraging students' mutual interests as they plan on theming rooms of their forthcoming office space around topics like dinosaurs and sea creatures.



Once students identify their interests, this can consume them. Dennis said that “if it’s something I’m interested in, then everything goes well.” Finn shared similar points, saying that he can go on tangents about the same topic and often “only talk[s] about things I’m interested in.” However, he recognizes that occasionally interrupting people to contribute a comment is not a good habit. Charles sees his own tendencies of talking in depth about his passions as not being socially acceptable. He will inform others about his identity by following a script: ‘I’m autistic, this is one of my focuses. I’ll rattle on about this... so let me know if you want [me] to stop and I’ll stop, but I’ll happily just talk your ear off on this.’”

Students’ particular interests can help them in navigating college, from making friends and dealing with stress, to finding possible career directions. Animals, for example, provide students with comfort and passion. Prior to college Charles found adopting a Golden Retriever puppy provided him with confidence to talk with other people, because they would come over to him and remark on his adorable dog. Such increased comfort has translated to Charles finding it easier to talk with other peers. John, long interested in the outdoors, determined that pursuing hydroponics would capitalize on his passion for gardening and growing food. Thrawn has identified feeling peaceful when handling animals to be an “unofficial benefit of autism,” and translated that comfort – and knowledge – to working at a local aquarium.

CACC instructors have taken note of students’ fervor for nature. In her wellness course. Wonder noticed that about half of her students had a “very deep affinity toward certain pets or certain types of animals,” as well as plants. She has incorporated this connection to the natural world by having students take group walks during class time as a way of promoting well-being. Along the way students tend to comment on facts about plants. Consequently, this course has

served as a comfortable and safe space for students to connect over their shared interests without fears of being judged or seen as weird.

Particular campus spaces can also foster community among students – both autistic and neurotypical – with hyperinterests. The main campus lounge area boasts a TV with video game consoles. Several students discussed their investment in video games throughout interviews, and referred to this campus space as a great way to meet other people.

For Sara Lyall, video games served another purpose: learning about college. Growing up she found *The Sims University* to represent her “main reference for what college was like.” Now she uses video games as a mechanism for engaging in storytelling, often with a friend. During our second interview, she asked me if I had played video games. When I mentioned an example (the *Uncharted* series), she used that as a template for explaining how she will “overanalyze absolutely every tiny hint of information” and create backstories of characters. Sara Lyall elaborated on how her creative process works:

I like writing stories about characters and developing the worlds around them. I don't like working from scratch, but playing a video game and adding things to it that are never explained in game is a ton of fun. Reading into the subtext and trying to answer my questions about the world using the tiniest context clues and my understanding of the characters really lets me stretch my creative muscles.

In essence Sara Lyall deconstructs scenes as opportunities to allow her imaginative juices to flow and make sense of the world, thus making it easier to navigate college life. Thrawn takes video games to another *level* as well by finding utility in understanding how characters, or people, interact with each other. Through “being able to apply that [knowledge] to the real world of learning how to make certain kinds of conversation,” Thrawn felt video games assisted him in

becoming adept in communicating with peers. Meanwhile, Stephen was the sole student who explicitly mentioned pursuing a career in video games. He was taking courses in game design at BMCC and excited about the prospects of this direction.

**Wavering Over Student Life Engagement.** Alongside taking courses, some autistic students participated in extracurricular activities reflecting their core interests. Others opted not to engage in the campus community. Students' engagement, or lack thereof, in campus organizations and activities illustrates the importance of feeling comfortable with peers and identifying alternative spaces to pursue their passions.

Students' interests in video games and anime led to formation of clubs, for which many autistic students partake. The anime club, for example, was a common outlet that students referred to as enjoyable, though Julia offered a counterpoint, in that she was "emailed to basically be given homework of watching the episodes they had watched, which I did NOT want to do and really just added another large source of stress to an already very stressful time in my life." Here we see how niche interests can both bring students together and also be exclusionary should certain students' strong tendencies turn others off. Another common outlet that appealed to several autistic students was the arts. Some, like Stephen, worked on campus productions, whereas Edweena participated in spaces related to music, per her career intent as a violinist.

Seeking out leadership opportunities is another story, often due to the social anxiety and commitment that comes along with such roles. Stephen, who explained that he was not as interested in interacting with other people – in many ways, a counternarrative to the vast majority of student participants who more explicitly sought social connection – mentioned his inhibitions in pursuing student government. Though the idea interested Stephen, he expressed his concerns about being inexperienced and thus had not moved further down that direction. That said he was

interested in having a leadership role and “to see how I [would] do when kind of let loose on something.” Edweena, on the other hand, has found leadership to be a great space for feeding her enthusiasm for advocacy work. She frequently participates as a campus representative, whether via public speaking or in developing events for the residential hall where she works.

Unfamiliarity with campus life offerings, or even disinterest in current organizations, also factored into students’ extracurricular engagement. Gabrielle noted how the lack of “diverse student program offerings,” in her mind, was a barrier to students she mentored. She also indicated that the timing of organizational activities, as well as the prominence of promotional materials being limited to in-person methods (e.g., bulletin board), restricted student engagement.

For some students, though, not knowing what to partake in is part of the issue. George enjoys communicating with people at club fairs, but has yet to decide what to join. Meanwhile, Julia participated in campus events, as opposed to joining a club, finding the college’s Pride fair and an event involving baby animals from the local animal shelter to be enjoyable. “I got to hold a kitten in my hands and it was truly a life-changing experience,” she said. Keith, more pessimistic, said he “looked at the official list of clubs, and there are no clubs I’m interested in. Many, in fact, I am actively disinterested in.” Rachel said that despite her son Andrew’s interest in virtual reality, he has yet to engage in BMCC’s virtual reality club. She said Andrew has set reminders to join, but recognizes that he has been holding himself back. “I think not knowing anybody is probably a huge part of that,” Rachel suspected.

### *Discovering Potential Majors and Careers*

Through taking college courses, engaging in professional development opportunities, and exploring transfer pathways, students identified possible majors that could manifest in rewarding careers. Concurrently they drew on their longstanding interests to influence courses and outlets.

Finn's and Edweena's experiences shed light on how exposure to relevant college coursework supported them in exploring music. Finn was only in his second term and beginning to take private guitar lessons alongside his CACC course and another college course, not quite sure what a career in music would entail. He was considering teaching as a potential avenue. Meanwhile, Edweena was one year further along into her schooling and had identified as a music major. Most of Edweena's courses harkened back to music, and through working with her advisor had been planning subsequent steps beyond attending BMCC. Edweena, an experienced violinist, was already well aware of the importance of staging a successful audition at her envisioned transfer university. "Now [that] I know exactly what I'm going to play, I've just got to learn it all and it's going to be great, and it feels like that's kind of very much within grasp," she said. She hopes to become a college professor and perform as part of a string studio.

Many students felt that their strong inclinations toward particular fields could amount to finding careers in these spaces, as their experiences to date suggest. Andrew sought to design a virtual reality game and believed a computer science career would serve him well, though he did not explain exactly why or how he landed on this topic. Instead, he shared that, having taken computer science courses in high school, he enjoyed them and wanted to proceed in this direction. Once in college he explored requirements for a computer science degree and sought to take one course in this arena: audio engineering. Like Edweena, he had begun exploring degree

requirements at his intended transfer university, specifically determining how BMCC courses would carry over.

Both Sara Lyall and Julia sought psychology as being viable professional pathways, but for different reasons. For Sara Lyall, the field came to her “so naturally that it seemed like a good thing to potentially study.” She had taken AP psych in high school and continued to find it worthwhile in college. Sara Lyall had been familiar with the manifestation of certain psychological terms, such as confirmation bias, and now had the terminology to explain her perceptions. In particular, she thinks becoming an autism researcher would help answer her many questions about her identity, such as why autistic people often dislike eye contact. While she was not entirely certain of pursuing a psychology career, as she also mentioned her interests in other scientific disciplines, Sara Lyall felt that this would be a great major. Meanwhile, Julia viewed psychology as “where being different is celebrated,” particularly “if you're weird in some way, that's an interesting thing rather than something that people are just going to try their best to ignore at all costs.” Studying psychology helps Julia understand herself and other people more effectively. Her mother Anne did not talk about psychology, but rather mentioned careers more generally where Julia could channel her communicate skills with other people, whether virtually or in person. Julia’s said "it makes sense to go... after a degree that's [in] a field that I'm interested in and something that could help me with getting whatever job I would feel... could be like applicable to whatever.” Accordingly, psychology made sense.

Both Josh and Thrawn explained their engagement in marine biology as potentially promising careers, though their levels of experience in this space varied. Whereas Thrawn was already working in an aquarium and obtaining much hands-on experience – albeit deciding he did not want to gain a college degree in this field at this time – Josh was earlier in his journey of

exploring marine biology. Taking a marine biology course during the prior term had furthered Josh's interest in this discipline, even despite his academic "shortcomings" in the course. Josh also reinforced how engaging in an adventure camp prior to college had enabled him to draw from his knowledge base and contributed to gaining confidence.

Enrolling in BMCC courses also assisted in exposure to new career directions. Stephen, pursuing digital media at BMCC, expressed his appreciation in taking game design courses and planned to continue to take these courses. Altogether they were informing his specific career direction. He explained the variety of jobs associated with video games appeal to him. In particular, he is thinking about working in the audio engineering, graphic design, and user interface specialties as reflecting his interests. Charles, having already had several careers in his life, viewed BMCC's cybersecurity program as reflective of his passions and helpful in that many peers in the program also identify as autistic. His logical, detail-oriented personality aligned nicely with working with computers, he described. Charles did not make reference to transferring to a four-year institution, and felt further engagement in the cybersecurity program would continue to be fruitful.

Parental influence also carried into how some students followed particular paths, showing that not only taking college courses shaped students' directions, but also how parents imagined students could leverage their interests. Dennis, for instance, had been encouraged to explore library science, deriving from his love of quiet spaces and reading. BMCC, however, does not offer a degree in this field, and thus he was somewhat stalled in making momentum. John, having determined with his family that starting a small business growing out of his hydroponics passion, had just completed his time at BMCC during our second interview. He plans on

teaching himself how to work in hydroponics through reading textbooks, though was currently not working.

Challenges in landing on a career direction extended across the students I interviewed, as illustrated. For Keith, he explained that working in special education *could* be useful, as it reflects how he volunteered with disabled children when he was younger. When I asked him how he landed on this field, he indicated that he “need[ed] to kind of pick something,” though did not elaborate. At this point, he was unsure about majors aligned with this discipline and generally expressed discontent about college and talked little about *why* he wanted to pursue this path. George said that he loves the process of learning and has not quite identified a specific career direction, though suspects that math or accounting could be feasible. “I enjoy answering the never-ending question of why,” he composed in his written reflections. “Acquiring knowledge is exciting for me. Learning for the sake of learning. Even if it is unused, it provides a way to a better understanding.”

Ultimately, some students were holding off on specifically indicating one career route due to the ever-changing nature of the world. The Coronavirus outbreak, complemented by ongoing development in exploring interests, halted them from making firm choices. In their written reflections, a few students answered the prompt about determining what career pathways they were interested in. Julia wrote “you say that like I have the slightest idea what I’m going to do with my life.” As illustrated, though, psychology may be one direction that aligns with her interests. Sara Lyall, meanwhile, said: “The entire planet is shut down. I’m hardly thinking about my career right now. I have to wait and see what survives first.”



### ***Identifying and Seizing Professional Pursuits***

In addition to determining what careers they wanted to pursue, autistic students needed to establish the initial step of seeking out jobs and making their current employment feasible. This aspect of their lives was marked by both mirth and defeat.

**Application Hesitations and Hurdles.** Obtaining employment signifies a barrier in its own right, though the process of applying for positions also stands as a hurdle, as parents shared. Describing Dennis, Amanda said “it's hard for him to approach someone and say, ‘I want to apply for a job.’ So just that first step of getting in on something would be the biggest challenge I think.”

Daisy said that Keith has tried to obtain employment, but he has struggled with the interview process. She expressed hesitation over Keith’s tendencies to get easily agitated.

I'm concerned he really wants a job, but I know that if he's frustrated, his reaction is not socially inappropriate and he wouldn't be able to keep a job even if [he] did get hired. So I don't know what kind of jobs would allow him to be who he is or gently guide him through the appropriate behaviors.

Here we identify how the root of the issue is not only in how Keith’s autism-related characteristics manifest, but also how other people to respond to them. The idea of *appropriateness* harkens back to ableist practices that construct what is considered acceptable or unacceptable. CACC presents a philosophy of both the autism community and the larger world better understanding one another, as opposed to one entity conceding to the other. In this manner Keith is inhibited by a system that does not align with his reactions, though he must also work on explaining and advocating for his needs when challenges arise.

Pete said John's barrier is not so much holding employment, but rather his lack of driving. For Andrew, Rachel said that he successfully obtained an entry-level job at a local supermarket, but only after she advocated for him upon not hearing anything once he submitted an application.

I actually ended up emailing the store managers and saying "you know, you guys have a disability hiring program and I would like you to know that my son would be the best employee you'd possibly have, 'cause he will never not show up, cause [he would] always be on time and will do whatever tasks you get him. He will be consistent and I think you guys should really consider giving him a second chance."

Ultimately, Andrew was invited for an interview. He prepared for this milestone by crafting a list featuring his strengths and weaknesses, in which he communicated his needs. This is a clear example of using self-advocacy in the best possible way. Unfortunately the hiring manager humiliated Andrew by having him read the letter aloud in public. Despite this mortifying incident, as Rachel described, Andrew was hired and has held the job for at least four months. Students participants neither described their job application processes nor intentions of concerns and interest in applying for jobs. This gap underscores a potential opportunity for CACC and perhaps even BMCC more generally to work on students' engagement in careers that align with their passions. Such an increased focus may lead students to become more adept in not only advocating for themselves, but also identifying professional spaces that are not engrained in ableist mentalities.

**Ebbs and Flows of the Working World.** Five students – Andrew, Charles, Edweena Julia, and Thrawn – held paid employment at the time of data collection. Though students varied in how much they depth they detailed their various jobs, each gives insight into how they as

autistic people navigate the professional world, one often comprising deep-rooted ableist beliefs and limiting professional prospects for neurodivergent individuals.

Andrew, albeit dissatisfied with working at a supermarket, felt the job was providing him with disposable income. While Andrew lacked viewing it as work experience, “because I’m not learning anything that’s useful,” he has spoken up for himself in a few contexts, thus practicing self-advocacy. When the Coronavirus outbreak hit, his job started giving him twice as many hours. While he did not think putting in more time would have a negative effect on his schoolwork, his parents suggested he ask for less time. Andrew described speaking up for himself, arguing that online schoolwork did not amount to needing to allocate less time toward school, and was granted 20 hours per week, mostly on the weekends.

Charles currently holds a part-time internship, having worked in retail prior to attending BMCC. In his current role, he feels comfortable talking about his autism identity and needs.

I'll sit there and tell somebody, “Hey, you know, I'm doing something here. It's kind of a little out of left field. If I'm not doing something right, please don't be subtle about it.

Please be direct. Please explain to me exactly what I'm doing wrong so I can work to fix it.”

His colleagues have responded well to this approach, and he recently received a raise, according to his wife Heather.

Edweena serves as a residential assistant (RA) in the BMCC residential hall, holding a variety of tasks, including planning events for and checking in on student residents. One of her favorite activities is developing programming regarding music. She follows a campus housing curriculum for creating programs that harken back to core values, such as knowledge acquisition, community and relationship building, and interpersonal competence. Edweena has found the role

to be both useful in making new connections and advocating for others, including fellow autistic residents. She frequently brings up being autistic in conversation.

Julia assists her parents in their medical practice, often handling administrative tasks like filing and shredding papers, and picking up prescriptions. Since the practice is located close to BMCC, she rides with her parents to and from work.

Thrawn, enthusiastic about working at an aquarium, described it as “a dream come true” for someone who loves sea creatures. He serves in various capacities, including as a tank interpreter who explains animals to visitors. “I will stand in front of certain tank or exhibit walking around to answer any kind of questions that people have about the exhibits,” he described. This role aligns well with his deep knowledge about the aquatic animals. According to Thrawn, everyone at the aquarium seems to know about him, and he has been enlisted to serve on an octopus research team. Taking courses has restricted job opportunities, though, leading him to express dissatisfaction with learning more in his professional role than as a student. While Thrawn did not participate in the second phase of the study, it sounded as though he was considering leaving college entirely to work full-time. Thrawn’s story acts as a counterpoint to a majority of student stories, in that it appeared his career possibilities outweighed what he could receive in a formal classroom. Likewise the aquarium did not see him as limited to holding a specific role, but rather viewed the possibilities of what he could offer in various capacities.

### ***Weighing Levels of Parental Involvement***

Key to students’ lives are their parents. Many parents have exerted their control to such an extent that students have lacked opportunities to establish their own objectives and interpretations, or know how to handle situations. Other parents have taken a more hands-off approach, which may either enable their children to thrive or struggle in navigating higher

education, sometimes both concurrently. In total, both parents and students work to resolve how to find balance during the college transition. CACC staff concurrently work to establish boundaries as students come to discover themselves and their independence as college students.

**“A Little Too Helicoptery.”** Elizabeth explained CACC is designed to give students agency and choice over their college pathways, though often this differs from their experiences in having overinvolved parents. Some parents push their children to enroll in CACC, with Elizabeth commonly hearing from students that they “just went along for the ride,” she referenced. Challenges emerge when students lack buy-in, as Taylor said. “That’s a surefire way to make sure that the student will never succeed in this program.” Whereas Daisy, Keith’s mom, said her son was open to participate in CACC, Keith said he is “going through programs that I’m told I should go into and that’s pretty much it.” Though Keith has remained in the program for at least two terms already, Elizabeth said that generally students leave CACC within the first few weeks or after the first term if they are not committed to program participation.

When students enter CACC, Taylor and Elizabeth meet with students individually, and then with their parents, to prioritize students’ perspectives. “[Elizabeth] and I are very intentional about not taking the parents’ words for the student and instead bringing the student in,” Taylor said. Parents are asked to take a backseat role, since many have had a high level of involvement in their children’s lives to date. Elizabeth shared the rationale behind their tactics.

I explained to them [parents] through collaborative problem-solving, the reasoning and why we have this in place and help them understand what we're doing to support the student and how them reaching out to do that actually interferes and undermines what we're trying to do. And so I let them know that if they have a concern, they should write

to me and then I can reach out to the faculty and the peer mentor, I can wrap all the pieces together.

The prominence of parents overstepping their bounds reflects a “system [that] encourages a certain amount of helicopter parenting,” Craig described. Taylor used similar wording to describe the situation, finding that “the kindest parents will just be a little too helicoptery.” This leads students to “fall into learn helplessness because they don't have to do things for themselves, because they're always so supported.”

Parental pushiness, in not allowing their children to make their own choices, can also extend to setting up career directions. Such dominance over their children's lives, even with good intentions, can prompt student frustration. Elizabeth described one student who wanted to emancipate himself from his “really toxic relationship” with his father, who has control over his son's finances. CACC staff can relay recommendations, and even encourage setting up meetings between students and their parents, but ultimately the student must take agency.

Parents have wrestled over how to let go of their children. Mackenzie reflected on when her son Julio started CACC that she struggled with allowing him to chart his own journey. She communicated with Elizabeth about this process.

The message was like “when you have a horse or something like that, you take him to drink water, but you don't take the water at him and give it to the horse. You just guide them, let them do it by themselves.” So, Oh my God, that was a huge message. So that night I couldn't sleep because I was thinking [Elizabeth] was right all the time.

Amanda said her difficulties arose out of her own profession. As a teacher, she helps children sort through challenges, and as a parent she has the same instincts. Anne, Julia's mother, has benefited from her daughter signing the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

waiver that allows her to partake in some campus meetings alongside her daughter. However, Anne recognized the vitality of her daughter attaining independence over her college journey.

**Parental Distance and Disagreements.** Students noted experiencing challenges with their parents, whether they were overbearing or uninvolved – the latter more of an anomaly – and navigating how to reconcile these rapports as college students. Finn said that, growing up, his mother “didn’t really trust me to do a lot of stuff on my own.” Keith complained about his mother Daisy tending to not listen to him, noting that “she never challenges her own assumptions.” Accordingly, Daisy said Keith has not wanted her to be as involved in his life at this point.

Other students had complications with distant parents. Neither George nor John had easy relationships with their fathers who were critical of how their sons presented autism-related characteristics. John said his father was never diagnosed as autistic, but reasoned that they “butt heads a lot” because they share many of the same challenges. “He tells me I am weird and abnormal,” John said. When they bond, it usually emerges when engaging in their favorite hobby: hiking. Thrawn expressed disappointment with both of his parents, finding that “I suppose the best thing that anyone in my immediate family has done is show me what not to do, what not to be like, how not to treat people, how not to live.” For Julia, she found her parents to be involved in her life, though held some angst toward her mother Anne for not disclosing her autism diagnosis earlier in her life. “The doctors told her to do it and she believed them ‘cause they said it was the best thing,” Julia said. Now, though, they are not as disconnected.

**Moderating Degrees of Dependence.** Balancing the dichotomy between giving their children enough space to figure out situations and tasks on their own, and offering support through being more greatly involved, represented a common tightrope walk for parents. Daisy

said she tends to give her son Keith much autonomy, though informs him that she is always available to help. That said, Keith has aimed to not want his mother's feedback or assistance. Amanda said she allowed her son Dennis to determine the steps he would take commute to campus (by bus). "He's grown a lot through that process," she remarked. Rachel has always tried to "empower [her son Andrew] as much as possible and help him be able to function with people." Though this language suggests a degree of seeking normalcy, Rachel's point reflects the parental desire to let go. Sara Lyall described her parents in this manner. "My parents have always believed in me having a level of independence and me being able to decide things for myself," she said. For example, as a child they consulted her on where to travel on vacation. At this point, Sara Lyall's parents provided her with agency in when and where she could attend college.

On the other hand, students still relied on their parents for a number of supports. John, who experiences concentration issues based on his level of interest in a course assignment, can count on his mother Pete for assisting him in completing tasks. As Pete described, she will sit down beside him and say, "you're going to write that damn paper now." John appreciated Pete's support, saying that she best knows about how he operates and helps ensure he will be able "to provide for myself and not crash and burn at life." Rachel consistently checks in on Andrew's course projects to ensure he is meeting goals. She, too, sits down beside him while working on course papers to talk through ideas, describing herself as a coach. Rachel "just [tries] and help him be successful, but he'll come to his own answers on things and do the work." Several students, including Andrew and Josh, relied on their parents for paying for college. Others checked with their parents for validation on handling course registration, as Finn and Stephen described in their peer mentor meetings. Throughout, CACC steps in to prompt students



to handle more tasks independently, “gently encouraging them to kind of start to make these choices on their own,” Frannie described.

**Embracing Parental Participation.** As much as parents determine how involved to be in their children’s lives, and students figure out how much they can handle independently, most students vocalized appreciation for how their parents have helped them throughout their college experiences. Several students recognized the important roles their parents played in maintaining their momentum. Josh said he valued how his parents police his progress on course assignments, which has helped him “remain focused and finish my assignments in a reasonable amount of time.” “I know not that many people can say that they have parents that are as warm and comforting as they are,” he added. Similarly, Finn described that his mother has “kept me on track” with handling tasks like registration forms. “She’d save me a couple times,” Finn said.

Julia said she felt lucky for having wonderful parents. She described her mother Anne as a “very warm, supportive person” who has always been a guide in navigating education. In her written reflections, she noted that she was proud of her parents, who work in healthcare, during the Coronavirus pandemic. Julia shared that her mother said, “I am a hero, too, just for getting out of bed every morning.” Sara Lyall said she never doubts her parents’ care and support. Stephen consults his mother when making decisions, even if they are ultimately his to make.

### **Navigating CACC**

Utilizing CACC entails many phases. Initially, students enter the program and become familiar with the program’s framework. Additionally, students utilize peer mentor supports, navigate self-advocacy issues, make sense of executive functioning skills, negotiate friendships and build community. Ultimately many students reap rewards from program participation.

### *Entrance*

The process of embarking on the CACC journey is marked by several stages that involve learning about what the program has to offer. Often students' journeys into CACC do not follow one common path, as illustrated in the vignettes that described their backgrounds, and the fact that they come from all over the country, according to Elizabeth. The linearity of CACC, though, allows for a straightforward experience from the very start.

**Initial CACC Impressions.** Students' familiarity with CACC typically derived from people in their lives who informed them about the possibilities of what CACC could afford. Heather, for example, had taken courses at BMCC and stumbled upon CACC. She encouraged her husband Charles to take a look, who was agreeable, and ended up participating. A number of students, including Dennis, Edweena, George, and Julia, had family friends recommend CACC. Once students reviewed the program website, took a tour of the college, or attended an information session (discussed shortly), many students felt like it would be suitable in serving their needs and desires out of college. "I was glad that there would be this... support group that would be able to help me out if I was overwhelmed," Josh remarked. Dennis also saw its merits.

I thought that it would probably be useful cause I, yeah, all of the autism-related skills I developed were self-taught and I figured it'd probably be a good idea to get some sort of support, get some actual formal help because I don't know what I'm doing wrong.

However, not everyone expressed initial interest. Edweena recalled her resistance, saying she did not like college staff checking on her, but then she realized that CACC would be "holding me accountable for the grades in my classes."

**New Insights in Information Sessions.** Held nearly every month, Elizabeth hosts CACC information sessions – mostly in-person events, albeit occasionally featuring online webinars –

that familiarize prospective students and their parents about the program. From the onset Elizabeth espouses the vitality of student participation as being the *students'* choice. She also demonstrates its tenets, such as prioritizing social justice issues. During my visit to BMCC, which took place around the time of its information session, I saw these tenets on display. The information session drew around 40 individuals, approximately 14 of them high school-aged students.

Students and parents quietly assembled into the event space. Neither Elizabeth nor Taylor talked with any group individually, other than encouraging attendees to sign in. The hour-long presentation commenced with Elizabeth explaining CACC's roots, showing its growth in participation, and listing its priorities. Throughout students watched the presentation, sometimes stammering or taking notes on pads of paper. To encourage participation among attendees, Elizabeth asked a number of questions that resulted in them raising their hands. At times she asked for attendees to comment on particular points, should they feel comfortable. For example, one prospective student tentatively asked how bullying was handled, to which Elizabeth responded that if consistent issues emerged, a conduct report would be filed.

The presentation, entailing a mix of formal remarks by Elizabeth and opportunities for questions and engagement, culminated in one current student discussing his college experience and appreciation for CACC. "For the first time ever, I believed that I might actually graduate from college" upon sitting in the CACC orientation years ago, he said. "I'm here to pay it forward." Following this section, Elizabeth opened it up to questions, to which there were countless, so many that Elizabeth still essentially concluded the event on time, but welcomed folks to approach her with questions individually directly after. A vast majority of current CACC students find the informational session to be their first direct contact with the program.

**Building Rapport in Orientation.** Orientation represents an exciting time for CACC staff. Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, orientation entailed a two-week process over eight days, with a few hours in person each of those days, plus time allocated for an online setting. This intensive period, which enables students to earn academic credit, helps establish bonds among the cohort, relay clarity and insight into the programming CACC offers, and provide a glimpse into college life. Throughout, CACC champions identity development work and other values inherent in its core areas. CACC staff experience excitement in staging the event. “I always describe orientation as it's like Christmas,” Taylor said. “I am more excited for orientation and meeting all the new students than I am for anything else, probably ever in my whole life.” Elizabeth often reflects on the programming and figures out ways to make changes for the subsequent year, which she finds to be invaluable. The positive ramifications of CACC’s orientations echo across campus. BMCC will model attributes of the orientation to be college-wide, staging a required first-year seminar.

One of the most rewarding orientation activities for students is when staff display poster boards featuring different interests, allowing students to place sticky notes with their names under their favorite activities of choice. Accordingly they find peers with similar passions. Based on this activity, an entire student organization centered on anime emerged. Elizabeth shared that the Fall 2019 cohort featured 60 new students, a record number. She recognized how the orientation is often a welcoming environment for students, who note “‘wow, there really are a lot of other people like me.’ And I just remember one student high-fiving another student and saying, ‘I’ve finally found my tribe.’”

Students commented on their reactions to orientation content, though most did not reference it when discussing their programmatic experiences. Dennis felt like he was finally

around “normal people” and that he could relate to his peers, and vice versa. George learned about the program’s stance in autistic people connecting with neurotypical individuals. “The world won’t meet you all the way,” he shared, relaying the philosophy. “You won’t meet the road all the way. You should meet halfway.” While Dennis and George gleaned a lot of what to expect from CACC and resonated with its values, Keith and Stephen felt quite the opposite. Reinforcing his continually negative take on CACC, Keith said “the orientation is mostly focused on like understanding what the f\*\*\* you are being asked to do.” Stephen, having already been to college before, did not find the content to be helpful.

***“It Was Nice Working with You”: Students’ Peer Mentorship Experiences***

“When you’re a peer mentor, you’re kind of more... boots on the ground,” Taylor described. The peer mentor component of CACC, one of its hallmarks, allows students to engage with a peer about their academic, social, and professional pursuits. CACC currently hovers around 15 peer mentors, each working with up to no more than 10 students. This section addresses how students make sense of their peer mentorship experiences.

Several students, including Andrew and Dennis, referenced the procedural aspects of peer mentor meetings, such as reviewing the agenda and talking through the individual items. My understandings of their interactions primarily emerged from watching their meetings. Nine of the 13 observations entailed watching peer mentor meetings, per students’ choice. These observations gave a glimpse into how peer mentors work with students, and vice versa. Several examples lend context to the procedures, conversations, and challenges.

Course schedules, assignments, and grades encompassed many of the discussions; these similarly encompassed hands-on activities where peer mentors walked through processes. During Andrew’s peer mentor meeting, for instance, his peer mentor Nini asked about his GPA. Andrew

did not know how to locate the information, prompting her to use his computer to pull up the platform and showing him what to do. He was earning a 4.0 GPA. For Dennis, meanwhile, he could find his grades, though was dissatisfied with his academic performance, having forgotten several assignments. Following through with tasks is a common difficulty for CACC students, along with paying attention to mentors' requests. Finn, when asked by peer mentor Rhonda to email her his forthcoming course schedule, asked a few minutes later who he should email the materials to. Additionally, when aiming to sign up for a new course, Finn struggled to sign up due to needing an access code. Rhonda offered him a set of next steps to follow.

Per CACC's philosophy, peer mentors aim to take a hands-off approach to handling tasks *for* students, but sometimes must show them how to complete them. This tactic manifested when both Finn and Josh needed assistance in signing up for accommodations. Rhonda asked Finn if he needed help, to which he acknowledged, leading Rhonda to review the process with him. Similarly, Josh asked his peer mentor Reina to walk him through how to register for alternative exams, causing her to scoot closer to him and show him the process on the computer. Often, though, peer mentors sit to the side and watch the students work on agenda items solo, taking notes of students' behaviors, statements, and challenges. Through utilizing CPS, peer mentors typically ask many questions and enable students to figure out solutions to difficulties independently. Elizabeth, filling in for a peer mentor, applied CPS most evidently when meeting with Keith, despondent over his patterns in dropping courses and struggling with course assignments. "I don't want to see you discouraged and upset," she said.

Some conversations focus on students' interests, whether through peer mentors prompting these topics or students discussing these endlessly. In Andrew's case, Nini asked about his week, and he did not engage with her. She remembered his interest in filming YouTube

videos and asked questions about that, showing interest, though Andrew did not elaborate. Sara Lyall and Gabriella discussed their shared love of travel, emerging in a brief conversation about this topic when Gabriella told Sara Lyall about visiting family abroad shortly and thus needing to provide her with a new peer mentor for the remainder of the term: Reina. At the end of their meeting Gabriella offered introductions between Sara Lyall and Reina, and left a card for Sara Lyall, thanking her for working with her. Sara Lyall responded with “it was nice working with you.” Gabriella’s ethic of care was apparent in how peer mentors communicated with mentees. Taylor, meeting with Thrawn, realized he was distracted by loud students in the adjacent room, banging the walls. She stepped out to tell them to quiet down, allowing Thrawn to refocus.

Peer mentors showcased sensitivity, patience, and consideration toward students’ needs. Taylor said that CACC students value the peer mentors so much that this program component often remains the main reason students remain in the program. “Even [among] the students who are like, ‘no I don’t need that anymore,’ most of them end up coming back and saying, ‘yeah, I think I might want that.’”

Though minimally discussed, some students expressed valuing their peer mentors, particularly based on how they serve as major supporters. With “peer mentors, you have all these different little levels of safety nets to catch you when you inevitably stumble,” Charles said. “And, to me, that’s the most important thing about the program.” George used similar jargon, calling them “life savers and they deserve recognition... because they are very supportive and understanding.” Through sharing resources, as Keith and Sara Lyall described, they learned about how to handle college processes, such as setting up appointments with campus staff. Josh shared how his first term in college was a precarious time, marked by challenges in navigating basic tasks. He “finally figured it out with the help of my peer mentor,” but had already dug

himself into a deep hole. Edweena and Sara Lyall have benefited from virtual and text discussions with peer mentors, finding them to be accessible.

In fact, CACC utilizes a text message platform that allows peer mentors to institute reminders for students regarding major tasks, like course assignments. Many students, including Julia, John, and Andrew, expressed the utility of having those reminders, a core mechanism for how peer mentors directly serve their needs. Reminders are especially vital in reducing students' executive functioning barriers regarding organization. Charlotte, Finn's former peer mentor, expressed how because students' phone numbers are listed in their system, peer mentors can easily plug in reminders for specific assignments. John appreciated the flexibility behind this platform, allowing him to establish *how* and *when* he received reminders. This process has enabled students to take greater charge of their individualized approaches to planning tasks, as Josh described. "I've set off multiple reminders to go off at different times so that if I get distracted I'll see, like a follow-up text saying, 'remember to stay on task,' or something like that, or just setting reminders for myself."

### *Navigating Self-Advocacy*

College represents a paramount stage in students' lives, particularly for those who enter directly from high school. They enter emergent adulthood and increasingly take charge of their life directions. For autistic students, though, this period is fraught with a number of challenges, particularly as many have long relied on adults handling tasks and making decisions for them. Addressing the need to boost student agency, part of CACC's core mission is to help students achieve their goals through advocating for themselves.

**"Asking for Anything Is Tough."** "I want them to realize whatever success they want to realize," Elizabeth said. College students, autistic or not, require self-advocacy, she noted, but



this is inherently difficult in the autism community. During their earliest meetings with incoming students, CACC staff recognize the lack of agency they have. Taylor recalled how one meeting with Elizabeth, a prospective student and their parent captured the point.

We kind of stopped talking to the parent and we started talking to the student and they kind of are like, “Oh, me, like you're going to talk to me?” And just kind of the shock that they exhibited about being included in conversation or just like having any part of a say over their education or what they want is pretty illustrative.

Students' experiences in advocating for themselves in college has not been an easy and straightforward path to follow. Andrew communicated the commonality of him not asking for supports he needs and “just try[ing] to survive without it.” When struggling with situations he poses a variety of questions to himself, aiming to select the best possible responses of how he can best communicate for himself. “I don't self-advocate because I think this person might have a lower opinion of me if they think my request is stupid,” he said. Such concerns are inhibiting, and thus he often talks through situations with his parents to figure out good ways of resolving issues, such as the aforementioned anecdote about asking for less hours when working. Despite these continued challenges, Andrew has found prompts and discussions in his CACC courses to enhance his self-advocacy skillsets.

In the same vein, other students have seen self-advocacy as an ongoing process. Dennis has found “asking for anything is tough.” “There are so many different excuses I've come up with over the years,” he added. He, too, has relied on key people in his life to help communicate for him, though he hopes that CACC will provide him with resources to employ. Sara Lyall demonstrated that she experiences stress when interpreting situations that could potentially

produce conflict. Thus, she avoids approaching people for help and aims to “handle everything by myself.”

I have no idea what the stem of my problem with reaching out to people is. So I don't really know how to fix it. I found that I can usually fix my own problems as long as I know why they exist.

Finn, who often follows the crowd in partaking in activities, inhibiting his own desires, said he joined CACC to be more confident in expressing himself. He credits CACC's emphasis on assertiveness as useful in navigating uncomfortable situations. Finn simply uses the line “I need some space” to share his needs without giving much context. “I think in the program I've learned too is that you don't try and... come off with a weak explanation. You can simply come up with something as forceful as you want it to be,” he said.

**Recognizing an “Internal Sense of Power” in a Self-Advocacy Course.** The most salient way students work on self-advocacy is through the third CACC course, solely centered on addressing these issues and enabling students to see opportunities associated with taking initiative over their lives. The course, which promotes students taking charge of their college experiences and other parts of their lives more generally, also centers on their rights as disabled people in the community. Through completing a community advocacy project, students are encouraged to “make change in their community, whatever it is that they define their community as at that point,” according to Elizabeth. “I can tell if they've had their self-advocacy course or not by how they communicate their needs,” Laura said, in terms of working with students facing conduct issues. “I can see the course material coming into their lives.”

John and Julia had completed the self-advocacy course when I conducted interviews with them, whereas Andrew, Dennis, and Sara Lyall had just begun taking it. Other student

participants did not reference the course. Through taking the course, John said he had learned “how to stand up for myself, how to present myself, how to reach out for help, not be shy about reaching out for help to people who better know what they're doing.” While much of the content was already familiar, he appreciated obtaining context about the importance of how “society also needs to step up and make their work environments more disabled person-friendly as well.” In one course assignment, Julia and a classmate created a plan for how a fictional character could better advocate for herself.

Andrew said one early course assignment, centered on conducting self-assessments on communication style, has been validating in recognizing his passiveness in advocating for himself. He realized that he tends to be comfortable in communicating about his needs with relatives, but not colleagues. Dennis sees parallels in not asking for help, hoping that the course would assist him with his reluctance to vocalize concerns or challenges. Sara Lyall said she had a “weaker connection to this class than I did the past ones,” though did not elaborate.

CACC engages in active role-playing to help students form phrases and techniques that work for their individual needs. John said practicing self-advocacy skills has been useful in receiving sufficient accommodations. Julia felt she possesses more freedom by gaining confidence to “make decisions based on what works for me.” Edweena has attributed possessing more agency due to engaging in CACC programming. “I definitely feel like I have an internal sense of power that leads to like total independence,” Edweena said.

**Advocating for Peers.** Though autistic students faced mixed levels of comfort and success in advocating for themselves, CACC staff described their efficacy in advocating for their peers. Jake described how, in settings where a student may be ridiculed or teased, autistic

students tend to be protective of one another. Taylor offered additional context of how advocating for peers manifests:

I would say it might be another very common autistic trait, at least in our students, that a lot of them find it difficult to advocate for themselves, but do not find it difficult to advocate for others, especially if they see injustice. That's a super common thing. And we often have students who care very deeply about their classmates and especially in their first year [they'll] show up and be like, "this happened in a class. I am so upset about it." And we'll have to help them find channels or report it or something like that.

Elizabeth provided an example of how Thrawn had worked to support a peer. He had noticed a fellow student was crying in the hallway and enlisted Elizabeth to provide support. "[Thrawn] was very, very respectful of the other student's boundaries and just said, 'you know, this student is very upset and I think they need to talk with you,'" Elizabeth recalled. Thrawn encouraged the student to share his experience with her, but without communicating *for* him. "I was just really impressed with his emotional maturity in that situation," Elizabeth said.

Students also shared instances of when they have advocated for peers, even if not directly asked to relay experiences of when they have engaged in these tactics. Dennis, for instance, realized a classmate was struggling with personal space issues and needed place to move around and fidget at his desk. He gestured to illustrate how he moved his own desk to provide his classmate with room to "skootch as needed." "I noticed that I've gotten reasonably good at seeing what other people kind of need to be comfortable," Dennis said. Thrawn has also communicated for his peers in the course. During the observation, he noted his tendencies to speak often in class sessions and help advocate for his peers who do not always feel comfortable communicating.

Edweena has channeled her passion for advocacy work to both participating in panels and creating her own outlets. As part of her student housing role, she was enlisted to participate in a national student services conference, representing BMCC, to talk about how she supports fellow students. During her own time, she was developing a virtual “stim-making” courses on how autistic individuals could relieve their stress through engaging in procedures to reduce their overstimulation. For instance, she was forming a set of tips on how weighted blankets and fidget toys could relieve stress. Edweena has drawn inspiration from establishing crafts-based courses for her residents in order to establish the foundation of this new outlet. “I definitely envision myself doing advocacy work in the future,” she said. “Above everything else, you know, I can't advocate for others if I'm not advocating for myself. So I'm doing both. I'm using the power of both to kind of come together.”

**Developing Self-Advocacy as an Iterative Process.** People who students nominated described their perceptions of students' growth in advocating for themselves. Daisy recalled how her son Keith informed an instructor about being registered in the DSO, having learned how to engage in this procedure through CACC. Similarly, Rachel explained how her son Andrew crafted an introductory letter of himself for his instructors about his strengths and weaknesses as an autistic person. Andrew had also grown in self-awareness and discussing his challenges. Elizabeth, describing Thrawn, said that he only felt comfortable advocating for himself when he saw his peers turn to her for assistance. “It took him a long time to build the trust with me that he wasn't going to be in trouble,” she said. Thrawn's evolution in gaining greater self-advocacy reached an apex when he applied skillsets attained from CACC programming to discuss with his parents that he did not want to remain in college.

Over time, through program participation, students grow more comfortable and confident in advocating for themselves based on their autistic identities – not allowing others to communicate on their behalf. CACC staff explained the changes they have seen in students’ self-advocacy. Jake shared how many of his students are making their own health-related decisions, “some of them for the first time in their life.” Students find joy when their new knowledge and sense of agency lead them to want to support important people in their lives. “When they feel like they can be agents of change too, for other people, they get real excited about the material,” Jake said. Elizabeth recalled how sometimes students’ presentations of self-advocacy skills can be unexpected and revelatory.

The thing that really surprised me this quarter the most is one kid who sat in the back of the class, left frequently to go vape out in the parking lot or wherever he went, did not engage much at all, came up to me toward the end, because he was failing, and he said, “what can I do about my grade?” And I talked to him a little bit, and he said, “I’m really learning a lot about self-advocacy. In fact, I want to advocate with my parents to ask them to take me out of ABA therapy.” And I’m sure my jaw hit the floor. And he told me what he was gonna say to them. He said, “I asked them about it before, but now I know more about what I need to say and how I need to ask them.” So this kid was sitting there the whole time and heard everything we were talking about and was engaging in his own way, and boy if he could make that change in his life, the whole thing would be worth it. Communicating their own needs also extends to realizing the necessity of obtaining support from others, as Elizabeth recognized. This aspect remains a major component of self-advocacy. “I am a huge fan of promoting self-efficacy and learned optimism and helping students understand that they can do these things, and if they need help helping them feel comfortable coming to ask for

help with it,” she said. For example, Frannie said she sees students progress from not knowing what to write in an email to initiating their own communication. Taylor also identified the differences in how students grow as time persists in program participation. “I think it's kinda realizing how much power they have over their own lives, helping them to kind of find that path and then helping them realize that they are supported and they do have resources,” she said.

### ***Deconstructing the Evolution of Executive Functioning***

The autonomy associated with college elicits excitement and freedom, and also the inner dread of needing to navigate everyday life without the same structure of high school. For autistic college students, this mix of emotions culminated in viewing college as an exhilarating, yet stressful time. In this section I present the issues that students and other stakeholders expressed regarding executive functioning issues generally, particular manifestations of challenges, and the CACC course that specifically works on easing executive functioning difficulties.

**Operationalizing Executive Functioning.** “Executive functioning, I think, is a pretty well-known sticking point for many autistic people, but also a very valuable college skill,” Elizabeth described. Autistic individuals’ challenges, executive functioning includes a number of facets, including managing time, organizing materials, initiating tasks, and engaging in self-regulation. On its website CACC explicitly lists out the various aspects they address in their programming. This range of activities, including having students assemble their own schedules and design organizational strategies that account for their learning differences, prioritizes students gaining self-awareness and agency.

For some students, partaking in CACC represents the first time they had been able to operationalize their executive functioning challenges. “I had never heard of executive functioning before (Elizabeth's) program,” Charles said. “I never really was able to understand it,

analyze it, study it, work on it because I just didn't have the skillset to totally kind of step back and look and piece together in a logical fashion,” he expanded. Likewise, Sara Lyall was familiar with the concepts, but found CACC to be helpful in using terminology and now possessing “a lot of ways to describe what I already kind of understood.” Several students, including Julia, John, and Stephen, considered themselves to be less adept in possessing executive functioning skills. Dennis views his own executive functioning as mixed, depending on the situation. No student said they were adept in this domain of their lives. The following areas of executive functioning illuminate how students interpreted and recalibrated their habits, as well as how other individuals perceive students addressing such issues.

**Time and Organization Hurdles.** Parents’ interpretations of their children’s executive functioning skills also varied from what students shared in interviews. For instance, Pete, John’s mother, said he is on top of organizational issues, but John viewed the situation differently. “I can really only keep one thing at the front of my mind at all times,” John said. Should he lack interest in a task, it gets “shoved to the back, and so out of sight, out of mind.” He credited his mother as “best suited” to set his calendar, due to his self-proclaimed lack of reliability.

In several cases, though, parents’ interpretations of their children’s challenges aligned with what students said. Anne, in talking about Julia, said her daughter “hadn't really realized that you could work on assignments before they were due.” Julia also viewed deadlines as a difficulty, resulting in her not being able to enroll in CACC during her first eligible year due to experiencing confusion over dates. Meanwhile, Rachel, Andrew’s mother, said he is effective in managing his own time. Andrew explained his process of setting up digital alerts for tasks, thus knowing when to complete them.



While CACC establishes reminders for students and course management systems like Canvas offer assistance, too, ultimately students possess responsibility for their actions (or inaction). As illustrated, remembering due dates is a common challenge for many autistic students. Dennis finds it “hard to keep track of time,” particularly when working from home. Finn also struggles with keeping a calendar and does not abide by due dates too firmly. By writing down when he wants to complete the assignment, he feels more ownership with the process. One of the most helpful takeaways Finn has gleaned from CACC has been to set timers when working on tasks and taking breaks that allow him to shift his focus. Needing reminders also emerged in conversations with George, John, and Josh. George joked that he had to set a reminder for our interview. Without reminders “I probably wouldn’t be as organized and useful,” he said. While observing meetings of students with their peer mentors, students communicated their time management issues. As illustrated in the section about missing due dates, Dennis, George, and Stephen had all recently forgotten recent assignments. Witnessing several meetings illustrated a trend: reminders were helpful, but in the end, students had to take charge of their learning.

Written reflections offered an avenue for some students to reflect on time management. Both George and Sara Lyall discussed procrastination as a barrier. George lamented his lack of discipline and prioritizing other tasks instead, leading him to “get locked up sometimes.” Sara Lyall explained her own tendencies that lead her to push off tasks, contextualizing the role of Coronavirus as further complicating the situation: “I am very prone to procrastinating, and now that the only system I had to manage that, changing environments, has been ripped out from under me, I am worried about being able to handle things.”

**Starting as the Struggle: Task Initiation Difficulties.** “Starting a task is the number one thing that students tell us they struggle with,” Elizabeth said in the CACC info session. As students face difficulties with managing their priorities and tasks, often the biggest hurdle is to take the first step. Lacking motivation and interest in tasks account for why roadblocks exist, according to people in students’ lives. Anne and Pete talked about their children not always understanding instructions behind assignments, leading to frustration in starting tasks. Sometimes roadblocks can manifest in tangible ways, as Frannie discussed. She referenced one CACC student who had good time management skills, but allowed a physical barrier to be overcoming. “It was a matter of just disliking walking up the hill to the bus... just an adverse task demand issue involved.” Since the student loathed this part of the route, it represented a disruption.

Dennis discussed how he has struggled with task initiation his entire life. “If it's not interesting, then even getting started, let alone keeping continuing the process,” is difficult, he explained. Finn tends to engage in “spacing out” when not engaged in a topic, allowing time to quickly pass, and thus finds it hard to start the task. Julia illustrated similarities.

I have like no physical sense of time passing. Like if I, if I'm in a room with no windows, no clocks, no nothing, I really have no idea how long I've been there... like there's a very real feeling of, “I'm trying, I'm trying to get up, I'm trying to do the thing and for some reason my body isn't doing it.” It's like you're stepping on the gas and the car isn't doing anything.

Sara Lyall, in the same way, toils with starting new tasks. “It’s just this weird sense of internal inertia where I know I need to do something and I want to do something and I can't make myself do it for the life of me,” she shared. Keith explained his own issues in starting work, yet

recognized that the problem lied with him, not the work. Stephen reasoned that his longstanding depression has contributed to struggling to begin new tasks, and even getting out of bed.

**Self-Regulation as Emotional Management.** Elizabeth described self-regulation as an executive function that, if not intact, “can be devastating to [students’] college career.” Experiencing moodiness, for instance, can disrupt any college student from making momentum on their tasks at hand. Other examples may include dealing with changes, identifying solutions to problems, and navigating feelings, all displayed on the CACC website. “Anything that applies to all college students applies probably twice to autistic students for the most part,” she remarked. Therefore, CACC works to help students recognize their emotions and work through obstacles.

Dennis said that he suffers from instances of lacking fine motor controls when he gets upset. “The more I try to be precise, the more I shake violently.” Stimming-like behaviors, where students may engage in a repetitive task that provides stability, surfaced during my interactions with some students. Dennis and Edweena fidgeted with physical objects. John deliberately and repeatedly moved his fingers as he spoke. Such stimming is not inherently negative, but rather how students self-regulate to remain focused and centered.

Becoming too concentrated on feelings, such as falling into depressive states, is also a source of disruption, as Elizabeth explained. Students have talked about this mental health issue in course. Additionally, traumatic incidents from students’ past, sometimes rising when topics make them think of those situations, have diverted their ability to self-regulate. Over time, though, managing emotions may ease. Mackenzie recognized how her son was “better handling his emotions than before,” having participated in CACC.

BMCC staff also talked about how they have navigated situations when students could not engage in healthy self-regulation. Laura mentioned how often she encounters faculty who

“will say ‘I was threatened’ when a student is having difficulty regulating their emotions.” Her approach models education and awareness: self-regulation issues do not equate to danger. Laura encourages faculty to prompt students who feel overwhelmed to step out of class and engage “rebalance.” Wonder, taking this to action, calmly explains to agitated students that using words – not engaging in physical destruction (e.g., throwing a notebook) – is the route to pursue when feeling upset.

**Taking Charge on Executive Functioning Via a CACC Course.** The second course CACC students take in their course sequence concentrates on both recognizing how executive functioning materializes in life and determining strategies to tackle challenges regarding possible obstacles. Elizabeth said the course objective is to have students “look deeper at their own executive functioning strengths, how they can use those on the job, and then how to also interact with other people’s executive functioning strengths and barriers.”

During my visit I observed an executive functioning class session, seeing in full force how both the strengths and weaknesses students noted later materialized. Grace detailed the class session in a straightforward manner and began by showing a few videos on goal-oriented persistence. She then asked for students’ interpretations. One student questioned the credibility of the speaker in the video, whereas another vocalized confusion regarding the intended audience. A third student considered the video “dense.” Upon listening to their comments and validating opinions, Grace listed out four discussion questions on the screen, assembling students into groups. While a number of students appeared very engaged in sharing their thoughts with peers, others sat to the side and worked solo on their computers. The group dialogue allowed for student representatives to curate their peers’ thoughts. Some students provided verbal comments, whereas one explained their understandings of goal-oriented persistence via showing a meme.

Students expressed a range of fervor for and discontent toward the course; most student participants had either been enrolled in or completed the course by the time I interviewed them. Student opinions drastically varied. Keith shared his distaste for the course across both interviews and the observation. He frustratingly vocalized that he had learned “nothing” from the course. Other students shared their dissatisfaction. Stephen found the final presentation – explaining the main categories of executive functions – to be basic, never knowing how to actually apply the skills listed. “It could be helpful, but just doesn't really mean much to me... it does seem a lot of just being like, ‘hey, here’s the key terms, here’s like the two-sentence definition.” Sara Lyall was also displeased, noting content was repetitive and dull.

Despite these criticisms, some peers had vastly different interpretations. Julia valued activities where they discussed how executive functioning skills could be applicable in various roles. “What was really valuable to me was basically the lesson that I’m not stupid,” she shared. Julia elaborated, explaining how she learned it was okay, and even preferable, to not engage in activities that do not align with her strengths. “I learned I shouldn’t ever be a barista,” she joked.

I also liked the executive functioning class because, um, it wasn't the same BS that we get in public school about how “you just have to work harder and train your brain to be able to do this thing that your brain literally can't do because that's what a disability is.” And the executive functioning class was legitimately about “no, trying to do it anyway isn't going to work well. It's better to find a way around it, another way to accomplish the goal that you want.”

The notion of flexibility in how to complete tasks also extended to how Grace arranged the curriculum. Josh explained how he appreciated having options in class participation, from writing an anonymous note to jotting down thoughts on the whiteboard. Dennis loved one course

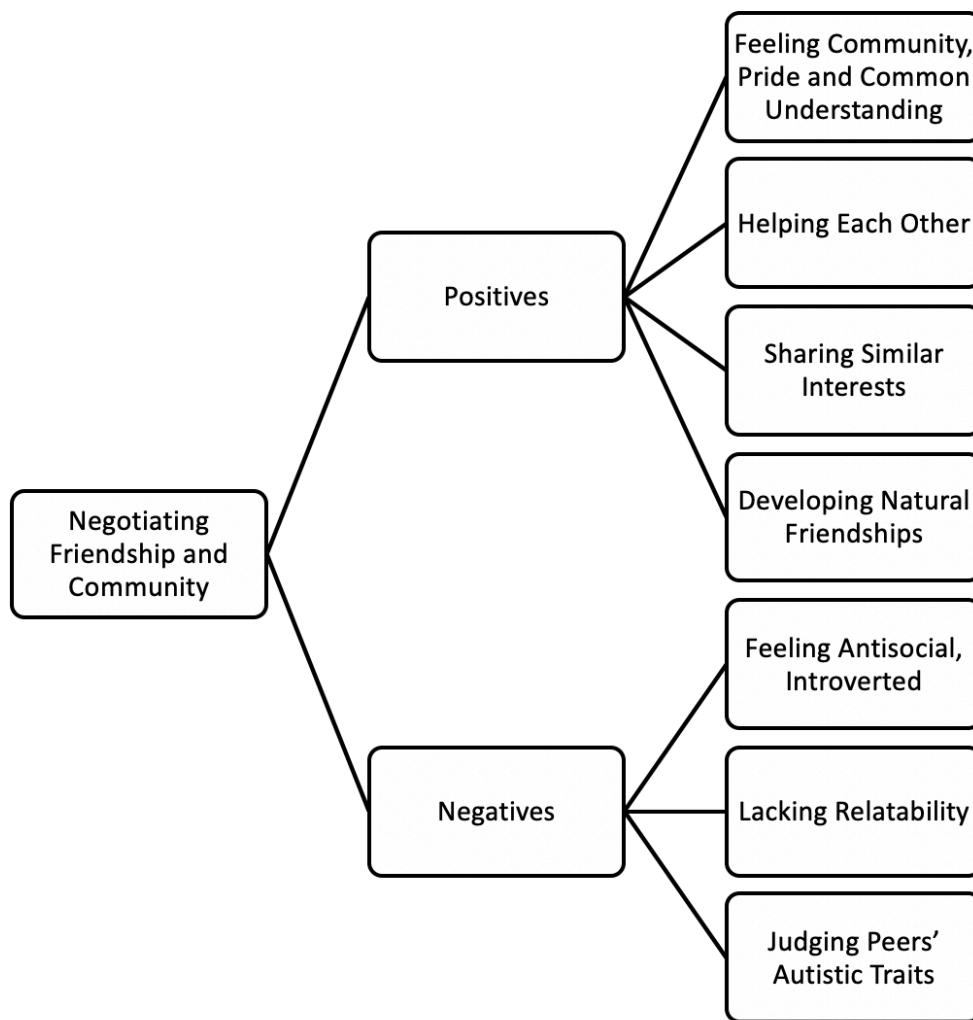
activity that involved designing a chart of how various executive functions interact. Andrew described engaging in self-evaluations of various skillsets and finding them helpful to better learn about his habits.

### *Negotiating Friendship and Community*

College represents a whole new world for students, one where they possess an inordinate number of avenues in forging relationships. As expressed by student participants, their time at BMCC has been marked by a bevy of sentiments, from feeling belongingness through CACC participation to disconnect in not relating to peers. Introverted and extroverted tendencies also surfaced according to personality and context, leading to challenges in making friends with peers who did not share similar qualities. For autistic students, negotiating friendship and community is always present and often intensified by social differences. Figure 6 showcases the positives and negatives associated with negotiating friendship and community within CACC.

**“I Found My Place.”** CACC, through representing a space for autistic individuals to connect with one another, has enabled many students to feel a sense of community and common understanding. These sentiments often emerge from the time they step into orientation, as was the case for Dennis, who had not been in a space with other autistic individuals beforehand (due to his recent diagnosis).

With the orientation, the thing is I actually said it out loud, “hey look, a room full of normal people.” It just seemed like a room full of cool people. Yeah. It's definitely different. It definitely felt different... I remember one time I butchered my own joke and somebody realized that I was trying to say and I was like, “thank you for understanding where I was going with this.”

**Figure 6.***Negotiating Friendship and Community*

Dennis reasoned that everyone understands what one another experiences due to belonging “somewhere on the spectrum.” He valued having interactions with other autistic individuals. “It is extremely refreshing to be around people who understand what's going on,” he said.

Many peers have echoed feelings of commonality. “Being in (CACC) kind of did open me out of the idea that there are more people like me,” Finn said. Sara Lyall valued learning about her peers’ experiences and how they have navigated challenging experiences. “It's nice to

finally have a group of people who are like, 'yes, eye contact is terrible' and to actually get it," she said. "Everyone is on the same kind of wavelength for the most part," Thrawn said. He elaborated.

[There is] shared understanding that everyone here is like everyone else. We have different experiences and different passions, but we operate in the same way. And with that we are united and can therefore speak with each other. We can solve each other's problems if we cannot solve our own.

Without CACC, George said he would lack the same instrumental support network. George has appreciated his peers seeing "value in my train of thought." "They don't care about the end result as much as 'how did you get there?'" While students are not always aligned in how their autism-related characteristics manifest, Josh said he finds these interactions to be "pretty enjoyable."

One heartwarming, if not unexpected, moment of connection surfaced when Thrawn explained the joy he felt in not being inhibited to offer and obtain hugs among fellow autistic peers, many of whom also valued physical comfort.

So many people in the (CACC) class, they've all said they would very much like hugs, you know, cuddles, but they can't because they're worried because it's really not a thing to do in the neurotypical world. It's not seen as an okay thing to do. It's seen as a creepy and more uncomfortable thing. Everyone's touched everyone. Everyone that I've asked where it's like, "Hey, would you like a hug?" Another student was always "yes," every single time. Just asking that. If you ask a neurotypical person that, they will kick out [the idea], they'll think that that's a terrible thing and there's like, "would you like to hug it out? Absolutely not. Not here." That really sealed it in that this was the right place.



This example illustrated a unique way in which autistic students like Thrawn found connection. He did not need to worry about misinterpretation or stigmatization; with consent and communication students expressed physical support for one another.

CACC organically provides a space for autistic students to develop friendships, often over their shared interests, such as video games – as Sara Lyall and Dennis talked about – and possessing similar experiences. “I discovered that the best friendships form naturally instead of going out and actually asking somebody to be friends,” Dennis noted. Sharing the same interests and hobbies makes all the difference, Finn said. Over a three-month span, he said he has developed his best friends. “It's remarkable just how well we get along anyway, even though we know each other for a short period of time.” Similarly, Thrawn “made friends almost instantly” when talking with CACC peers about related interests. “It was just another burst of endorphins telling you that, ‘Oh, I've found my people at last. I found my place,’” he said. Taylor recognized how strong initial connections can cement relationships. “Once they land on a topic that another student is interested in, they jump in and.. they're going to talk for hours,” she said.

When staging the pizza social to enlist student participants, I saw this natural chemistry emerge. Students gathered around talking about video games, sea creatures, dinosaurs, Lego, and a variety of other special interests, building off of one another's comments with fun facts and relevant pictures on their electronic devices. While some students led the conversation more than others, all appeared to be listening and engaged in the conversation at hand.

People connected to autistic students have witnessed the same sense of community. Akin to Thrawn, who noted autistic people being on the same wavelength, Amanda (Dennis' mom) made the same remarks. “In college, individuals are “really kind of proud to be autistic,” Amanda said. While her son was not as social as some of his peers, Rachel said Andrew has felt

“some connection and kinship there that he never had before.” For Heather, Charles’ wife, she identified how shared experiences have cultivated belongingness.

I really think there's, you know, a sense of community there because there's so many things in life that, you know, while you can be sympathetic towards someone, you can't really understand what it's like to go through what they go through unless you've gone through it yourself.

Elizabeth also sees the community form early on. She identified that Thrawn had often felt ostracized for using “big words,” but he was welcomed by other peers who accepted him for those qualities. “That was kind of one of the first times a student in the group had shared their vulnerability, and so he helped other students start to open up.”

Elizabeth has seen students’ acceptance of one another materialize when one student in a CACC course vocalized depression as representing a barrier to self-regulation. Other students followed suit, disclosing their own barriers. “They were very empathetic with each other, and it’s amazing to see how the cohort stands up for each other and looks out for each other,” she said. Students’ desire to help others also translates to non-course contexts. Taylor walked into a campus building one day and saw a new CACC student experiencing troubles in locating CACC’s study hall space. “One of our returning students just happened to be here and was like, ‘oh, I’ll take you up there.’” Taylor said that their “students are just super empathetic and love to help each other out.” Thrawn described his own empathetic tendencies toward other CACC students.

I have something that I affectionately refer to as the “mom friend override,” where if one of my friends is in any kind of like emotional or mental distress, I can be the bigger

person... If they need a person to be caring, understanding someone to listen to their issues and give potential advice, I will be that person.

Outside of CACC, students have either kept up friendships stemming from their previous schooling or sought relationships with people in other spaces. Students' frequency in talking about non-CACC friends, though, was more limited overall. For Edweena, she utilizes both online band fan groups and her music community to find peers who share the same passion. "We'll break down the music theory behind the album that we both enjoy while we listen to it on a record player," she composed in her written reflections. Finn, also musically inclined, seeks spaces where he can talk with other people about artists.

Julia was the sole student outside of Charles (married) who talked about a current romantic relationship. Engaging in group gatherings with her boyfriend and his friends offer much joy. She noted in her written reflections that she had fun engaging in "dramatic readings.. of the inevitably bizarre reviews on 'adult product' websites and I laughed the hardest I could remember in a long, long time." Additionally, Julia shared with me a set of text message exchanges between her and her best friend (Patty), who lived in a different part of the country. The messages' content, centered on a conflict with a mutual friend reconciling her autism diagnosis, also demonstrated how Julia discussed her boyfriend. For example, Julia told Patty how she had recently come out as bisexual to her mother. Julia "had to spend like ten minutes assuring my mom that I am not in a polyamorous relationship." Patty replied: "I didn't think about being bi could come with the assumption of dating both a guy and a girl at the same time."

**"I Haven't Really Been Able to Relate to Any of My Classmates."** CACC has presented outlets for students to forge connection and community, and simultaneously observe

how autism-related characteristics present themselves in their peers. Some of these traits they cannot relate to. Students' stories offer perspective to these difficulties.

Lacking the same interests as their peers is a major source of disconnect. Finn complained about the cliquy nature of some students, saying that if some peers are not as interested in a topic as them, they may shut others out. John said he appreciated his college peers' maturity, compared to when he was in high school, though said he has been unable to connect with them. His mother Pete elaborated why: John's interests in rock climbing and hiking differ from many CACC students' interest in video games, which he is "absolutely disinterested in." In the same way, Andrew lamented that he cannot connect with his CACC classmates, though he reasoned that their differences in interests are akin to neurotypical peers.

Julia said the variety of autistic students in the program, complemented by her own uniqueness, translated to feeling connected with the neurotypical community. "There is a spectrum energy and there's neurotypical energy and then I'm just stuck here with my weird [Julia] energy," she said. She also used an analogy to illustrate how the autistic community has much variety: "You can have a bunch of candies that are all different candies, but are all flavored like the same thing, or you can have the same candy in a bunch of different flavors."

Through CACC participation, Andrew said he now knows "not to expect a bunch of autistic people to be very similar to me." In particular, he spoke to variations in sensory sensitivities and engagement in communication patterns not aligning with his traits and personality. Likewise, Sara Lyall recognized sensory differences among classmates, feeling hers are more pronounced than others. Thrawn, generally verbose, shared that he sometimes finds it difficult to talk with other neurodiverse peers who may be quieter.

Charles, George, Julia, and Stephen commented on how they viewed the spectrum of autistic students to be salient, thus not always feeling relatability with peers who could not conceal less socially-acceptable qualities. For example, Charles said that being intellectually privileged has made it hard to work with peers who cannot make decisions or communicate as quickly as him. “I’m learning how to be more patient,” he said. However, he expressed frustration with himself over not always being understanding of other autistic students’ differences. “If I expect neurotypical people to be patient with me because of my autism, what does it say if I’m not patient with other autistic people?” he posed.

Charles recognized his self-described “deeper, darker ableist” qualities when explaining how he could divide the CACC community into two camps: those who are able to “contribute to society” and their counterparts, who “are never going to quite get there.” He expressed frustration that the program was not intensive enough for some students, and in the process, it slows down the pace for other students who would rather delve into content in more depth. As a result, Charles believes that the CACC program staff should be “slightly more selective than they have been” in who they admit. Charles shared that he is adept at “metacognition so I can step back and kind of go, ‘Holy crap, I’m being an ableist right now as an autistic person to another autistic person. I’m being an ableist. Holy f---ing s---t. I got to stop this.’” Through attaining greater education about the concept Charles identified his ableist leanings and even questioned who should be served in CACC: students who present more salient autistic tendencies deemed as negative, or students who present more subtle autistic tendencies, not viewed in such a problematic manner? Such produces a gap in the community based on the prominence of autism-related characteristics.

Julia shared similar sentiments about the bifurcated community, remarking on communication-related differences that produced feelings of detachment.

Sometimes I feel sort of like other people talk like computers in a way that I don't usually know the use of usually. Not exactly like, "Oh, this person sounds like a robot," but like it feels sometimes like people are working on preprogrammed phrases that may or may not be quite right... it sort of almost makes me feel like I am the weird one.

As a result, Julia said these situations "make me feel like I am strange in some way." For George, he felt frustrated with how his CACC peers see him as "a neurotypical person to them," because of the salience of their autism-related characteristics in comparison. "I'm in that situation where, 'Oh, he's normal. Oh, he's not normal. Well, what am I?'"

Stephen also felt disconnected, finding that he did not have the same challenges that his peers experience, such as understanding tone of voice. He expressed irritation over peers going on tangents and having trouble communicating with one another, which he could not relate to. "Even before this program I was pretty convinced [I] didn't really have autism or that it was misdiagnosis, and this program and experience just further enforced that," Stephen said.

Collectively these points harken back to the internalized ableism inherent in many autistic students, even with members of the community they inhabit. While CACC is meant to foster community and belongingness among individuals within a common identity, the variety of individuals' characteristics, interests, and personalities contributes to a melting pot of people who do not always unite.

**Struggling to Make Friends.** Despite CACC generally affording a more welcoming and accessible space for developing friendships, some students have long experienced challenges in

befriending peers, often by virtue of their introverted personalities or social anxieties. Students illustrated a variety of challenges and reasons that constrained their social engagement.

Several students, including Andrew and Stephen, viewed college as a time to gain knowledge, not engage with peers. Andrew reasoned that limited free time inhibited opportunities for coming to know peers. “I could be working on other schoolwork or watching videos on my phone,” he said. He considered social interactions to be boring, unless centered on an important topic. Andrew finds pleasantries to be “fake,” so he does not like following social traditions. Stephen expressed irritation over the expectation of making friends in courses.

I'm always asked this in the context of like, “Oh, did I meet people during class?” But I always bring up the point of like, “well, when you're in class, you're listening to a teacher give a lecture or doing work that you're supposed to do for the teacher. So it's not really a chance to meet people really.”

Similarly, Keith said he does not seek spending time with peers. “I don't actively go out and say, ‘hey, want to hang out?’” Both Keith and Andrew, and their mothers, expressed that they tend to just go to campus and return home, not engaging with other people on campus. Charles, while not opposed to making new friends, finds it easier to rely on his longtime, closer friends. That he is nearly a generation older than many of his classmates also creates disconnect. “There’s this weird, almost hero worship that goes on,” Charles described, noting that his CACC peers see him differently from other peers. Thus, he has not made many friendships within the program. Sara Lyall aims to have other people approach her due to being introverted. She described that, after our interview, she would “go home [and] I'm going to hide myself in a small dark room and not interact with anyone for several hours because I need to charge my social battery.”

A few counternarratives exist. Edweena, who considers herself more social, often relies on meeting friends of friends, as well as having worked at the front desk at BMCC's residence hall, to build her network. She also invests herself in interests with peers who have similar interests, such as music, as indicated earlier. Additionally, she has turned to joining online communities with individuals who experience various types of marginalization. This has helped in cultivating both friendships and autistic pride.

Both Finn and Dennis consider themselves to be more social in college than ever before. "I don't know how I managed to stay being alone for long periods of time," Finn said. Julia, a self-described extrovert, likes engaging with other people, though recognized it has been challenging to find peers she can connect with in college.

### ***Experiencing Rewards Through CACC Participation***

CACC's merits are countless, as student participants complemented by people connected to them, have expressed. "As I've looked around the nation, I think it's one of the best [programs]," Pete, John's mom, said. "That program, in my mind, is valuable in the longitudinal sense more than in the band-aid," she shared. "The seeds are planted by the program and it helps them once they're ready and once they're old enough to be ready, whatever that may be." The three most common benefits noted by participants were CACC's support systems, transferability of programmatic insights, and feeling liberation and resilience.

**Understanding the Value of Support Systems.** Several students noted that one of CACC's greatest strengths is in its staff, having individuals they can consult for assistance. "If I'm having issues with my class, [if] I'm feeling stressed, uncertain, overwhelmed, I can always reach out to them to help me," John said. Similarly, George and Josh appreciated having this network, should they get overwhelmed. "I was glad to have that sort of support group that I



wouldn't be thrown directly into the deep end of the pool,” Josh said. Sara Lyall detailed parallels in how CACC's reliability is a boon. “It's there to have my back in case I fall,” Sara Lyall said. “Knowing that if I do hit one of my snags, which may happen sooner or later, I have someone I can go [to] and something that I can lean back on is really nice.” While Keith was overall dissatisfied with college, he recognized the merits of having people in CACC he could consult if he was struggling.

Individuals peripheral to the program also see the support systems as beneficial. Craig said, into the second term of the program, students “look after one another to an extent, so that matters a lot.” Amanda valued how her son Dennis has “people there that he can talk to if he has trouble, so I'm happy with that.”

**Seeing Transferability of Program Insights.** CACC's value also materialized in how students explained the takeaways from programmatic context extending to other sectors of their lives. Edweena said programming is “always like resonating with me, like, ‘Oh, I do this in (CACC) and I can apply it to anything else.’” In this way, she could see CACC's effects as far reaching. “CACC ask[s] me questions that I haven't thought about before,” Andrew said, having benefited from the prompts that instructors pose, such as determining strengths and weaknesses. “I've ended up kind of learning more from the questions than the actual content of the classes.” George noted how through CACC participation he has learned not to overanalyze everything, allowing him to feel less stressed in critiquing “every minute detail” of situations. He has also learned how to craft proper emails, a transferable skill.

One key lesson is that no one correct formula exists for solving problems. “I learned that I'm allowed and able to look for alternative solutions to things,” Julia noted. “Just because I'm given, okay, choice A or choice B doesn't mean that those are the only options and that I can

actually be pretty good at finding [a] third option.” CACC’s philosophy of “work smarter, not harder,” according to Julia, has allowed her to feel she can be more successful in life.

### ***Gaining Liberation and Resilience***

CACC encourages students to feel empowered in tackling their lives, a quality that many individuals connected to CACC students have watched firsthand. Through participating in CACC, John “has become more confident in just being different,” Pete said, describing her son. Pete has not only watched John blossom, but also a number of other BMCC students, too, having worked at the college for years. “I’ve seen some students kind of emerge... from the Chrysalis into the butterfly,” she said. “He’s so proud to belong to that community,” Mackenzie said when describing her son. “He said, ‘I love myself a lot,’ and that was because of this program.” CACC’s commitment to helping students feel liberated stems from Elizabeth’s framework. “I think that having a space where they don’t feel judged for what they think and say, and where there’s really no wrong answers to things, is super liberating for them,” Elizabeth said.

Charles most explicitly sung CACC’s praises in bolstering his liberation and resilience. In the past, challenges that presented themselves in college would derail his progress. However, CACC engagement has taught him strategies to overcome difficulties. He explained how, last winter, one of his dogs accidentally scratched his cornea, which would have ordinarily led him to drop out of college. Charles attributed CACC-taught coping skills as “instrumental” in maintaining his academic momentum. “The negative talk has largely disappeared,” he said.

Experiencing liberation has also emerged through CACC participation, in that Charles openly talks about his autism at work and can more explicitly advocate for what he needs. While disclosure is not easy, Charles said “I never could have done that without [the CACC] program.”

## **Handling Health and Emotions**

Moderating autistic students' college experiences is their mental health and emotional state, both of which manifest in sometimes startling and significant ways. This section touches on how students handled co-occurring diagnoses related to anxiety and depression, as well as managed intense feelings of frustration.

### ***Battling Anxiety and Depression***

In addition to navigating life and higher education as autistic people, seven of the 13 student participants (Edweena, George, John, Julia, Keith, Stephen, and Thrawn) indicated in their demographic surveys of having been diagnosed with anxiety and/or depression. Other students, and the people they nominated, also referenced anxiety and/or depression as part of students' identities. These co-occurring disabilities regarding mental health factor into how students processed stress, new experiences, and the highs and lows of academia.

This section addresses each student who discussed mental health issues, though it is worth noting that not all students who listed diagnosed, or undiagnosed, disabilities openly talked about such topics. Additionally, for seven students (Dennis, Edweena, Finn, George, John, Julia, and Sara Lyall), they answered the written reflection prompt about how they manage any anxiety they face in their lives. While Julia did not directly address her anxiety and depression during the interview, in her written reflections she communicated that feeling overwhelmed during the term when I first interviewed her contributed to taking time off from college.

Even before the world went to hell in a handbasket... the last quarter had been a massive disaster that led to, among other things, multiple panic attacks a week, inability to focus, random breakdowns, at times becoming physically ill due to stress, and severe depression symptoms.

Further burdening Julia was taking multiple courses at once and switching therapists. By leaving BMCC for at least a term, Julia wanted to prevent her academic performance from dropping “due to something that was out of my control,” she wrote. In this sense, Julia was advocating for herself, making a choice that would uphold her self-care. Anne recognized her daughter’s experience, noting “she has days where she's got a lot of anxiety and panic.”

Edweena had taken time off between high school and starting BMCC due to “crippling” anxiety and depression that had been “compounding on itself.” Through meeting with her therapist, she realized she was not yet ready to tackle college. Eventually she enrolled at BMCC and has since found it to be a fruitful experience, though has experienced stints of overcoming anxiety and depression. Prior to our first interview, Edweena mentioned that she had dealt with a difficult winter. Later, during our second interview once Coronavirus had shut down the college, Edweena realized that she needed to move back home for her well-being. Ultimately, Edweena considered mental health issues as ongoing, though tries to practice “coping tools” like listening to music and singing, or taking a shower, to relieve the stress.

Finn considered his anxiety “kind of obnoxious” and “not always clear” in terms of how and why it manifests. More recently he suspected his anxiety stemmed from worrying about the unknowns associated with the future or feeling burnt out in taking difficult courses. During Finn’s observation he referenced having started a new medication and was off antidepressants. In his reflections, Finn said that engaging in deep breathing, reading before bed, and talking with his mom or friends all contribute to feeling calmer.

Charles, who had been misdiagnosed in his younger years as having anxiety and depression, said he resonates with possessing social anxiety. His wife Heather echoed this point, describing how Charles experiences social anxiety over not being able to read peers’ body

language, lamenting “there's not a medication that makes you magically be able to understand people’s body language.” He also tends to get anxious when anticipating grades, worrying that he will fail college. Heather has provided encouragement to relieve his anxiety.

Keith’s depression surfaced when talking about his lack of interest in being in college and feeling stuck. “I can’t do college, but I can’t drop out,” he shared. “I have zero options, so why f---ing bother?” Over recent years he learned that he also had anxiety, unbeknownst to him, despite having been diagnosed nearly a decade beforehand. “Literally no one had ever told me about it until then,” he shared.

Stephen, having long battled depression, felt like over recent years he has matured and more effectively handled associated challenges. That said, his challenges regarding task initiation have accounted for not always having the motivation to get out of bed and go to courses, thus illustrative of the depressive tendencies. He described that his multiple disabilities “kind of get bundled together... and it kind of gets a bit hard to manage.”

In Thrawn’s case, his anxiety connected back to food, he said. Though Thrawn did not share these details in the interview, he mentioned his parents being “health nuts” who have tried to influence his nutritional choices. During his peer mentor meeting, Thrawn talked with Taylor about how he has concerns over his food being taken away from him. While home alone the prior weekend, he said he ordered pizza and felt full for the first time in a month. Thrawn also described how he buys unhealthy snacks at the campus bookstore, so individual items do not appear on his parents’ credit card, hence why he avoids using vending machines.

John said his “anxieties are not completely rational... but they are a real and intractable problem for me.” His mother Pete had elaborated that negative experiences in his K-12 schooling contributed to John’s anxiety. Currently John’s anxiety has presented itself by not having a

common living situation. John's family built a "hut" for him in the backyard that he sleeps in, in order to avoid living in his home that has fire retardant coating, which he learned may be unhealthy for humans. He described his hut as giving him "a sense of safety and serenity." John shared that anxiety continually impacts his life, and his ways of managing stress are not always fruitful. "More optimally, I stim," he wrote. "Less optimally, I take my fears out on other people by being snarky. I also hide from my emotions by watching TV shows."

Other students only brushed on how they manage anxiety and/or depression. Dennis noted in his written reflections that, should his "stress level get too high, it triggers a meltdown." He joked that his stress avoidance strategy is engaging in avoidance of the stressors. "For obvious reasons, [it's] not helpful," he said. Similarly, George noted that he has employed distractions to avoid thinking about the stress, but it often "builds up into physical distress." For Sara Lyall, she wrote that she addresses stress by having her "overly-rational brain tell my emotion center to knock it off."

### ***Managing the Highs and Lows of Emotional Regulation***

Students commonly described the range of emotions that defined particular salient experiences, and aiming to regulate and moderate negative ones as much as possible through the assistance of CACC programming. More than any other emotion code, students expressing frustration appeared most frequently. For autistic students, sometimes the frustration emerged from their own autistic identities and differences, as exemplified throughout the findings. Across the board, whether students thrived in CACC or felt disconnected from its value, all expressed some degree of frustration with aspects of the programming and people. The prominence of frustration is not meant to convey a negative stance, but rather to illustrate the complexity of

students making sense of and addressing their reactions to situations that heighten stress and anger. Here I share the most apparent instances, or types, of frustration surfacing.

**Recognizing Pervasive Frustration.** All stakeholder groups discussed the frequency in which some autistic students could become frustrated. Sometimes these traits could lead to disruption and disconnect. BMCC staff and CACC staff relayed anecdotes that contextualized how they approached students' frustrated tendencies. Grace, for example, handles tense classroom situations as proactively and positively as possible.

When someone gets upset it, everybody freaks out a little bit. And so what I usually try to do is just have them step outside to [be] just like, "let's remove that air from the classroom." Again, it's not punitive, it's just meant to like give everybody else sort of a break. And usually students will take me up on it. I tell them, "you're not in trouble. I just think you could use some space." And that's worked.

Laura, in managing student conduct issues, often sees students, autistic or not, acting out of frustration. She tries to avoid situations intensifying to the point where reports must be filed. "There's some stuff where the managing emotions escalates to a point where disruption we can handle pretty informally." The challenge becomes working with students who have committed aggressive acts, such as throwing objects or damaging property.

Daisy (Keith's mom) and Pete (John's mom) described how their sons were often easily agitated growing up, though recognized that more aggressive tendencies have lessened over time. John, though, still becomes easily triggered when frustrated or upset when "something won't work right" and when being in social settings all day, according to Pete. "My aggressiveness is a manifestation of my pent-up stress that I haven't been... relieving myself of," John said. Through releasing the rage, sometimes by breaking objects at home, John emits the anger.

George expressed having similar challenges in dealing with anger. “I don't have a short fuse as much as I have a long fuse that blows up like Mount St Helen's... it's my explosions are not fast. Generally they take a long time and then they go boom,” he explained. Thankfully, over time, these have been less frequent and intensive in nature.

During interviews and observations with students, I also identified a few instances of students becoming frustrated with themselves and other people. During Dennis' peer mentor meeting, when asked if he had a final exam, he curtly responded, “it's math, of course there is a final.” His mentor acknowledged his response and moved on to the next point. Keith, meanwhile, demonstrated frustration during most of the interviews and observation via his tone of voice and facial expressions, often complaining about his coursework. Elizabeth, serving as his temporary peer mentor, practiced CPS by acknowledging his frustration (“it sounds like you're discouraged”) and asking him how to reframe the situation. Keith cursed and raised his voice, eventually breathing heavily and closing his eyes.

**Settling Tension with Faculty.** Dissatisfaction with faculty members' personalities and pedagogical approaches have prompted feelings of frustration among students. Elizabeth hears these complaints often, serving as a mediator between students and faculty. While she encourages students to advocate for themselves via email, directing messages to faculty and copying her into messages, at times she may intervene. She recalled one recent scenario involving many students, both autistic and non-autistic, expressing discontent regarding not knowing the instructor's expectations. RateMyProfessor.com comments further validated these opinions, she shared. “That was the number one complaint is that she never really said what she wanted,” Elizabeth said. Misunderstandings represent a common challenge, Taylor added. “I



would say more often than not it's instructors who don't understand how to teach our students or how to understand our students."

Students noted various frustrations, from complaining about faculty who do not know how to use online course management systems (Dennis), fail to share feedback (Andrew), struggle in engaging students (Sara Lyall, Thrawn), and, as illustrated, provide inconsistent expectations (Keith). Keith shared his extreme discontent with his photography professor.

I emailed him ahead of time, asking if I need to provide my own like camera or not. "Oh no, you'll be fine. Don't worry about it." Then, when class starts, he sends everyone a video that opens with... "you're gonna need a \$300 camera for this class." And I emailed him and he said "not to worry."

This contradiction, complemented by finding the material difficult to complete online, led Keith to drop another course. Though students overall relayed favorable remarks about their faculty, hence the limited examples to draw from, these examples show how the curriculum, course management, and character flaws can impede student learning.

**Experiencing Discontent with CACC.** The CACC program encompassed perhaps the most salient source of frustration that students communicated, either in terms of the people they interacted with or the programming they engaged with more generally. Here I disentangle the discord.

***"Formulaic" Peer Mentors.*** The peer mentor component offers flexibility in working on students' specific needs, despite the common template that guides them through common procedures each meeting. However, common complaints emerged regarding not appreciating the routine aspects of meetings.

Andrew, for one, felt little value in reviewing his academic performance each meeting due to receiving good grades in his courses. Julia was one of several students who has not found professor check-in emails useful. “They also sound very formulaic to the point where I worry about the impression it actually makes on the professor,” she commented. The procedural aspect of meetings also bothered Keith, who took issue with meetings consisting of his peer mentors filling out forms. Stephen expressed discontent over peer mentors checking on him to complete tasks and let him know about due dates. “It doesn't really seem to do much more than you would get out of just, say, checking your Canvas every few days,” he said.

Thrawn was particularly disappointed with his initial peer mentor meeting in which he was asked to check his grades. This situation recalled past memories of being infantilized by a superior. “I left early because I was like, 'I'm not doing this. I did not come here to be patronized and not come here to be treated like, like a brainless infant who couldn't do anything right then,’” Thrawn recalled. Though Thrawn gave peer mentor meetings another chance, he still disliked engaging in busy work and having his “emotional intensity” wasted on tasks that do not work for him, such as using planners. Thankfully, he appeared to have a good rapport with Taylor, his current peer mentor, during the meeting I observed.

***Disruptive Classmates.*** Paralleling the points illustrated earlier about how some CACC students did not always befriend classmates and peers because of differences in their autistic manifestations, this also exacerbated to students feeling frustrated with them. Charles provided one example. In one of his CACC courses, he and his classmates developed online portfolios, leading one peer to erupt. “What do you do when you've got somebody in the classroom who's having a meltdown about creating a LinkedIn profile because he thinks the internet is dumb?” This disruption forestalled the class from proceeding with the content for the day. Both Dennis

and Thrawn complained about a peer obsessed with rabbits who, when fixated, cannot talk about anything else. Edweena has experienced instances of her autistic classmates talking in a misogynistic way, upsetting both her and her female instructor. Stephen expressed irritation over his peers' differences in processing nonverbal communication. These examples demonstrate not only heterogeneity within autistic students, but also, at times, variable manifestations of autism-related traits that prompted frustration.

***“Doesn’t Quite Give Me Anything New.”*** Six of the 13 students (Charles, Edweena, John, Josh, Keith, and Sara Lyall) shared disappointment in being all too familiar with CACC course content, thus finding it repetitive and not novel. “Sometimes it feels like we've been studying the same thing over and over and over,” Sara Lyall said. “And I don't know, maybe it's because I've learned a lot of what they cover already, but it just, it's almost dull,” she continued. John considered the familiarity a “rehash” of textbooks and resources he had long consulted. Charles recognizes his own frustration stems from having already learned many skillsets years ago. “I wish to God I'd had this program 10 years ago, so there's a lot where I can sit there and go, ‘Oh, this is useless. This is dumb,’” he noted. “I can say this is useless for me with where I am at my journey.” However, he understands the value it holds for his peers and acknowledged that he still benefits from reinforcement of skills. John said that he was “very willing to participate in [CACC], but it doesn't quite give me anything new.” While Josh expressed less frustration with the repetition than his peers, instead seeing value in processing information multiple times, he said he saw the “validity” in their argument.

***“It’s All Kind of Surface Level.”*** Similarly, the foundational course material bothered Sara Lyall and Stephen, as well as Andrew. Both Stephen and Andrew felt they could generate the same knowledge base through looking up content on the Internet. Stephen elaborated:

It's kind of thing where for all the time I spent in the program kind of just spinning my wheels on a bunch of different stuff and very slowly going through stuff I could've just easily got that from like 10 minutes of browsing articles about surface level executive functioning stuff.

He was particularly frustrated over the focus on definitions and terminology, as opposed to the program “not really showing the application of 'how do you translate this knowledge on to actual action?’” Stephen said that “it’s all kind of surface level.” Final presentations, for instance, required students to only cover “introductory” content. Andrew shared his own complaints, considering course content to be “super basic information.”

***Additional Discord.*** Entire courses can cause frustration, as Julia noted. She hated the stress management course, which she considered “was the main source of stress in our lives.” Additionally, she took umbrage with the career-centered course framing each profession as having its own issues. It “isn't helpful if you're actually trying to find a field to go into if you feel like literally every option is a wrong answer,” she said. Keith expressed agitation over the executive functioning course not sharing with students an exhaustive list of executive functions, saying the course was “garbage.” Stephen determined that his frustration was not only with particular aspects of the program, but its entirety, notably because he felt his needs were not being met and that he did not learn much from course content. “I would just generally not recommend the program,” he said, indicating it “doesn’t have much to offer.” Students’ recommendations on how CACC could be improved are listed in Table 13.

### **Figuring Out the Future**

As students venture into the unknown of what lies ahead beyond their time at community college, they vocalized both concerns about the future and excitement of the possibilities they

could embrace. This culminating section of the findings expresses how students envisioned their next steps, moderated by the novel COVID-19 environment they were entering, the fears they had for the future, and the goals they envisioned they could achieve.

### ***Dealing with Lockdown: The Emergence of the Coronavirus***

In the midst of data collection, the Coronavirus pandemic broke out in the United States. BMCC soon became particularly hit by the international crisis, as its closest metropolitan city represented a major epicenter. Courses shifted to an online format toward the end of the term when I first interviewed the students, with the administration using the term break as an opportunity to shut down the campus and convert all courses in the next term to exist completely online. During my follow-up interviews with students and BMCC staff, as well as with parents, Coronavirus' impact on students' lives became abundantly clear. In a mere matter of weeks the pandemic had produced a range of isolation to independence. Whereas some students like Dennis and Edweena missed spending time with their peers, other students such as Andrew and Finn were not significantly impacted by the disruption. Many students explained how the pandemic was overwhelming and exhausting, leading to disinvestment in academic work, particularly due to the nature of working from home. Each student who participated in follow-up interviews discussed their experiences.

Surprised that he had not “gone insane from cabin fever yet,” Dennis expressed much frustration over being stuck at home all the time. “Everything sucks,” he remarked. “The world decided to do its best reenactment of *The Day The Earth Stood Still*, planning the end of the world as we know it.” Dennis missed studying in the library and meeting up with friends to play video games at the campus lounge. Since he had been in the midst of setting up a job shadowing

opportunity with a librarian prior to the pandemic hitting, Dennis was particularly disappointed by the timing. “This entire coronavirus thing is suboptimal in so many different ways, he said.

The gravity of the pandemic led Edweena, who lived on campus and oversaw students in campus housing, to leave campus for the term. She maintained her RA role remotely, thanks to an accommodating staff who allowed her to continue creating events, albeit virtually given the circumstances. Campus housing was only at 50 percent capacity during our follow-up interview, about one month into the stay-at-home orders. “People who left for spring break... a lot of [them] left without giving their keys back,” she said. “It’s kind of a mess.” Moving back home was an important step, as she had been suffering with great stress toward the end of the previous term. Studying from home, though, has not been ideal, particularly in reducing her motivation level and experiencing feelings of disorientation. “I can do everything I am like responsible for doing currently from like my bedroom or you know, wherever else in my house,” Edweena said. “And that’s really bizarre to me, because that’s a total mess with my routine.” No longer does she have the distinctions across using spaces for different reasons. “It’s harder for me to kind of latch on to something when I’m just kind of like constantly being like, ‘this just doesn’t feel right.’”

Julia found the pandemic to exacerbate the overwhelmed feelings she had experienced prior to the end of the last term, which had resulted in her taking a leave from college for a while. “Hopefully pandemics aren’t going to become a regular issue because, if they are, there are going to be a lot of people on the spectrum who are in bed with their weighted blankets over their head,” Anne, her mom, shared. Julia despised how Coronavirus had worsened her fear of germs: “I’m literally living in my worst nightmare more or less.” She had now given up on maintaining a normal schedule, often sleeping at odd times. Julia, one month into the stay-at-home orders, had engaged in activities that made her feel more centered, such as reading and writing fanfiction.

Sara Lyall has struggled to work from home, no longer feeling as motivated to work. A self-described “terrible procrastinator,” Sara Lyall would find it productive in the past to change environments while studying, but that is no longer a reality. “I don't really mind the isolation much ‘cause you know, I'm very introverted anyways, but it's definitely different and I miss my freedom,” she said. “I miss being able to go places.” In her written reflections, Sara Lyall expressed missing communicating with other autistic people in person.

Staying on track had similarly influenced Stephen, who no longer had going to campus as an accountability mechanism to accomplish his work and interact with people. The timing of the pandemic coincided with Stephen ramping up efforts to engage in more activities outside the house, such as shopping and spending time outdoors.

For John, who had just completed coursework to receive his associate’s degree the prior term, said that during this new phase he was staying at home most of the time. Akin to Stephen, John had been starting to engage in more independent activities, such as hiking trips, prior to the pandemic. “I feel more isolated than ever, and it sucks,” John wrote in his reflections. That said, John continued to engage in outdoor activities that limited his exposure to other individuals, allowing life to “carry on” as much as possible.

Some students illustrated the pandemic’s ramifications were not as significant as their peers. Life was “almost exactly the same” for Andrew, save for taking online courses. Finn did not express being terribly impacted, but missed seeing his friends on campus, especially since some of them were not as keen in virtually meeting. Keith, who described himself as introverted, said he remained at home as much as he used to before the outbreak. While the pandemic had not significantly impacted him, George said he suffered from a lack of routine – for instance, not

heading to campus on specific days for courses – and was now sleeping at random times.

“Nothing’s really working anymore,” he said.

### ***Experiencing Fear of the Future***

In the midst of a pandemic and figuring out their lives, several students expressed their concerns over what lay ahead. Some fears were more inside their own heads, others far outside their control. Collectively they reveal the gravity of issues that define many students’ lives.

Finn, who desired transferring, shared being scared over what life would be like when no longer in college. “I guess there is like a fear of like life after university, so I want to be in university as long as I can,” he said. He also shared concerns over losing sight of his goals and continuing to feel “stuck in a monotonous cycle.” Other fears ranged from facing unemployment (John) and having inventions developed too early (Andrew), to making poor decisions (George) and not knowing how long the pandemic would last (Sara Lyall). Dennis’s fears took on a weightier theme, dreading death and living alone. He does not like being the only person in the house at night, he wrote in his reflection. “Darkness is scary,” he wrote.

Another fear – or, at the very least, a source of major anxiety – is learning how to drive or driving. Through avoiding driving, some students inhibited their own independence. Andrew, Dennis, and George discussed how they cannot drive due to being distracted by all of the stimulating visuals and sounds. For Dennis, he became “too easily distracted by [his] own thoughts.” Edweena and Thrawn were planning on getting their driver’s licenses, but expressed tension over the process. Edweena described having a bad experience with driver’s education and was “slowly working through” the terror of driving.

Parents also contribute to fears of driving, as a few examples reinforced. George shared how his father would yell at him while driving if he became distracted, only worsening the



situation. Pete shared how she experienced concerns over how John's anger management would present itself in driving contexts. In Dennis' case, his mother Amanda said "he didn't want to learn to drive because of the ADHD." She added that "he thought he'd be too distractable, which I think was wise." Here we see how parental influence underscored students' fears.

Despite students' fears of driving, and parents' fears of their children driving, Elizabeth viewed lack of driving as a "nonissue." "I'm actually astounded that they can take buses because I can't figure my way around a bus to save my life," she shared.

### ***Attaining Degree Aspirations***

Though John had just completed his work for his associate's prior to the second interview, most students were too early in their college career to earn a credential. That said, many still held ideals for walking away from their time at CACC with a diploma in their hands. Andrew looked forward to transferring to an east coast university the following year, in order to pursue his goals of being enrolled in a technology-focused institution. In the process he would receive his associate's degree. Dennis, Edweena, George, Julia, Sara Lyall, and Stephen held similar aspirations, albeit with different timelines. Stephen, for example, realized that it would perhaps take him two or three years to complete his digital arts degree at BMCC. Though Charles and Josh did not engage in second interviews, their demographic surveys indicated interest in attaining Bachelor's degrees at some point. It is unknown if obtaining an associate's degree was part of their plan. Similarly, Keith noted his intention of getting a Bachelor's degree in his demographic survey, though failed to reference an associate degree's during the interview. As Thrawn was planning to drop out of college, and did not engage in a second interview, an associate's degree was not in the cards.

### *Demonstrating Transfer Intent*

Preparing students for transfer is a key component of BMCC, which boasts the highest numbers of community college transfer students in the state. Since BMCC features straightforward transfer agreements, most credits tend to move with students. Indeed, BMCC hosts a number of four-year degree programs, though a majority of CACC students are not enrolled in those outlets.

Most students, save for Dennis, John, Stephen, and Thrawn, noted their intentions to transfer to a four-year institution. However, a majority had yet to formally begin the process of planning their transfer trajectories. Finn, seeking a music career, had not identified a specific place to transfer – in the past, he was looking at Bachelor’s programs in biology – though sought to remain in the western United States. Sara Lyall similarly desired remaining in a familiar area, preferably smaller universities in the same state, She had not formally started the preparation process, though had identified a few possible options. “I’m considering [transfer], but that’s not something I’m actively working [on] at the moment,” she shared in her written reflections. Keith, struggling to complete courses at BMCC, viewed transfer as far out of reach, yet still wanted to have the university experience. Clearly, the idea of transfer was on most students’ radar, albeit not something prominent in their lives at this juncture.

Setting forth to attend a university was only an active priority for a few students. Andrew had recently met with an academic advisor, determining what credits would transfer to his university of choice. Communicating with her instructor about potential transfer options, Edweena was considering an institution in another state and already thinking about graduate school. She shared excitement over preparing what to play for her violin auditions. It’s “very much within grasp,” she said.

## Reflections of Findings

Upon designing my dissertation research, I wrestled with the seemingly counterintuitive challenge of “whose stories am I aiming to share?” Arguably I was focused on ensuring that the individual autistic community college student’s story, and their stories collectively, would remain spotlighted. Yet I also experienced tension in wanting to guarantee that the story and influence of the community college autism transition program, for which the students have all been enveloped in, would not be overshadowed or lost. I even received questions from fellow scholars entering this study regarding if this was student-focused research or a program-focused research endeavor. Ultimately I concluded that I honored my original intent by centering students’ experiences, and in conjunction – albeit in a more reduced fashion – giving full perspective to the autism program as a place that students inhabited. Hence, this is precisely why I opened the first findings chapter by setting the backdrop of the institution and program, followed by presenting individual student vignettes, and finally dedicating the main findings chapter to the primary themes that surfaced.

The most salient reflection I engaged in while reviewing the findings is not just what participants shared with me, but what they did not share. For example, I could interrogate why student participants filled out particular written reflection prompts over others, or why they provided very brief answers to particular questions. Similarly, I wondered if CACC staff shared certain stories over others to provide a more self-favorable narrative. “Did parents focus too much on their children’s challenges compared to their strengths?” I asked many a time. I also pondered the frequency behind autistic students responding to questions with “I don’t know.” Some of these questions related to asking if peers have similar interests to them and what sparked their interests in certain disciplines, Silence and absence regarding certain material – or a

preponderance of content on others – can often give meaning to the story. The ways in which I have presented content, covering both breadth and depth regarding themes and associated sub-themes, contextualize the stories shared. What they cannot always reveal, unfortunately, is the “unsaid.”

Consequently these reflections bring me back to my original research question that asks how autistic community college students enrolled in a college autism transition program navigate higher education. In many ways we can never truly determine and fully uncover autistic community college students’ experiences, but the study takes a major step in giving a glimpse into the ways they address transitions, new opportunities, and unclear subsequent steps. Findings shed light on a few overarching points.

Major insights entail the prominence of a positive sense of autism identity as guiding students’ abilities to recognize and address the socially-constructed challenges associated with autism. Even those who have greater autistic pride must deal with structural and internalized ableism. Through CACC program participation students gain a greater sense of familiarity with both these keywords and strategies on how to address them. In the same space, though, they learn how that the executive functioning differences definitive of their lives – and more specifically within their academics – are not inherently problematic. As autistic students make sense of the enhanced independence they possess, so must significant other people in their lives, too, particularly in concert with college staff who aim to cultivate their agency. Further complicating and contextualizing their experiences are nuances associated with specific courses, interactions with peers, career exploration possibilities, and dealing with mental health issues that may stymie their progress. Eventually, though, the ways they navigate higher education, sometimes filled with twists and turns, inform the directions they take moving forward, whether

it encompasses leaving the college, identifying a transfer institution, or even finding a particular professional pathway.

## **Chapter VIII: Discussion**

I frame the discussion across three threads that unite Neurodiversity Theory and associated perspectives in conjunction with the findings. Accordingly, the section is divided into three components, each with particular points reflective of findings, to illustrate themes' relationships with Neurodiversity Theory.

### **Contextualizing Neurodiversity**

This first part of the discussion examines how much of the findings directly fit within the characteristics and tenets of Neurodiversity Theory as an iterative and multifaceted movement that lacks a common direction. Neurodiversity Theory privileges neurodivergent perspectives and recognizes how members of the autism community face both contextual strengths and challenges.

### ***Navigating Normalcy and Combatting Ableism***

The Neurodiversity movement works to defy the typical deficit-based approaches inherent in a neurotypical world where autistic people are often belittled (Walker, 2014). One major theme that surfaced in the findings, and connects back to the theoretical framework, is the notion of autistic students working to counteract the normalcy that defines larger society (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008). Normalcy did not enter English consciousness until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as a way of society determining what is considered ideal; essentially, thinking and acting against norms is automatically assumed as bad (Davis, 1997). Because of this messaging existing across all spaces of life, and across many subcultures, many autistic people grow up attaching

their differences as negative or wrong. For autistic individuals, much like other disabled people, combatting structural ableism and internalized ableism surfaces across many spaces of their lives. Campbell (2008) noted "... disabled people often feel compelled to fabricate 'who' they are - to adopt postures and comportments that are additional to self" (p. 157). Consequently, this can lead to questioning oneself, engaging in passing, and making sense of ongoing tensions.

Autistic students in this study described ableism in both direct and indirect ways, and in alignment with some of their parents expressing ableist language (as in the case of Anne, Julia's mom Anne), the prevalence of such harmful rhetoric is undeniable. John's sentiments on ableism, considering himself lacking functionality and growing up in a home where he was meant to be functional, also illustrates the pervasiveness of such discourse.

Some students identified their own ableist tendencies, in large part due to learning about the concept in CACC courses, and expressed their understandings without any prompting during our interviews. Charles, for instance, realized his own ableist inclinations while describing autistic peers demonstrates the disabled versus able-bodied dichotomy. Here we recognize how an autistic individual pinpoints a divide within the community based on the level of one's disability-related characteristics surfacing to impact others.

Save for some exceptions (e.g., Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2012; Casement et al., 2017; Vincent, 2017), existent literature on autism in higher education does not attend to explicit references of ableism; even in these cases, authors mention the concept, but not so much how it presents itself in the data at hand. Among the studies as part of my systematic literature review, internalized ableism did not appear once. On the other hand, my student participants made direct references to how they are subject to and even enact internalized ableism, thus extending our understandings of the current base of knowledge. More recently, Botha and Frost (2020) found

that autistic individuals possessing lower levels of emotional wellbeing were associated with having higher levels of internalized stigma – in this case, while internalized ableism was not used as the term, the principles apply.

In my study, Keith, for example, illustrated this clearly by using self-destructive terms that positioned autism as a negative and seeing himself as the problem; this existed in concert with statements that demonstrated depression and frustration. Internalized stigma may also extend to lack of autistic identification, as Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2017) noted and evidenced in how one of my participants (Stephen) questioned his own autistic identity.

Botha et al. (2020) found that even among individuals who possessed positive autistic identities, they held some internalized stigma, describing themselves in deficit-based and stereotypical ways. Some of the autistic student participants in my study, including George, Julia, and Josh, while informed about the negativities of ableism via CACC, dealt with its ingrained nature. Julia, for instance, demonstrated reflectiveness when noting that she knows “we're not supposed to use the word 'normal,' so I'm going to say I have a little, I have more of a desire to be regular... to me there is an appeal in the way that everybody else does things.” Despite this instance, CACC appeared effective in at least opening up students’ minds to the ideas of ableism being a two-way street – enacted by neurotypical people, and even internalized within autistic people themselves – though this remained an ongoing reconciliation.

### ***Celebrating Autistic Pride and Connecting with the Autism Community***

The Neurodiversity movement arose through the investment of autistic individuals working to reposition the narrative away from neurotypical people talking about neurodivergent people. In that process they have explored how autistic individuals can be experts of their own experiences and not feel shame about who they are (Sinclair, 1993). To what degree individuals

experience autistic affiliation and even pride, though, may derive from how ableism factors into their lives. As existent literature on autistic college students, in particular, demonstrates the lack of attention to this point, that makes the findings in my study regarding manifestations of autistic pride even more revelatory.

Humor, as an example of autistic pride, while underexplored in the literature outside of references to how autistic people may struggle with understanding humor, appeared across many students in both salient and understated ways. Dennis discussed how he valued his peers appreciated his unique form of humor. “They picked up on the point I was going for,” he exclaimed. “The joke was 'do you think grammar Nazis are anti-semantic?’” Dennis grinned over his clever wordplay, as did I. It was clear that he felt prideful over his humor resonating with another autistic person, both with his classmate and even me as the researcher. In this unassuming instance, the tenet of Neurodiversity encouraging community fully presented itself (Kapp, 2020). Many other students, including Julia and Thrawn, also demonstrated their humor in discussing niche interests and making self-deprecating jokes.

Neurodiversity’s emphasis in bringing autistic people together further revealed itself in how student participants discussed valuing how they could finally connect with fellow neurodivergent peers, whether in courses or even in the residence hall in Edweena’s case. Such positive feelings can have ripple effects that extend far beyond the reaches of a programmatic context with other autistic individuals.

An interesting subtheme associated with autistic pride, despite not being addressed much in the literature, is how through feeling more confident in themselves as autistic people, they may express empathy in direct ways. A student participant in Searle et al. (2019) noted how rewarding it was to be interviewed by fellow autistic people, in that they could empathize with



one another. Through CACC's role in promoting the importance of acknowledging, understanding, and respecting peers' autistic differences, some students shared their empathy. Finn, for instance, talked about not knowing about face blindness until the course, having made assumptions in the past about individuals who possessed such characteristics. "When like somebody with face blindness did not notice me, I used to take it personally until I learned that they had it, so I mean, that was the big transition." Now he realizes that it is just a quality that some autistic people possess. Elizabeth discussed how across many courses she saw students band together to support one another, whether in the case of a student being targeted with a homophobic or transphobic remark, or another discussing their experiences with depression.

Through the community that CACC builds, much like other situations and programs where autistic people can learn from and with each other (e.g., Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Searle et al., 2019), students become part of the Neurodiversity movement, whether they realize it or not. Not all movements are epic and large-scale across traditional means like marches, legislation, or other types of activism; as Neurodiversity showcases, finding community and feeling agentic in communicating their experiences is a monumental step toward pride.

### ***Wrestling Over Executive Functioning Difficulties***

Neurodiversity recognizes the contextual challenges that autistic people face are not necessarily bad, but rather based on social norms (Robertson, 2009). Self-awareness of these difficulties stems from a number of experiences, including implicitly through dealing with tasks like time management and explicitly through hearing about these terms in CACC courses. John referenced in his written reflections, for example, that he found it hard to maintain self-discipline, hence inhibiting his employment opportunities. He still held ideals of holding a job, but determined that it would take time and working more on the executive functioning challenges

inherent in his life, such as handling more responsibilities independently. CACC programming, though, illustrates the notion of adaptation and not having to conform to traditional ways of addressing challenges. Here CACC shows how difficulties may arise in different settings or contexts, but, with some resources and supports, autistic people are capable to figure out workarounds, sometimes through each other.

Akin to participants in Fleischer (2012a), who faced challenges in figuring out daily tasks, my student participants experienced setbacks in completing duties, even with reminders from their peer mentors via an electronic system. Considering that students possessed this added layer of assistance and accountability, it comes across as somewhat surprising that reminders had not reduced the frequency of students forgetting to submit assignments. It appears that enhancing executive functioning is an iterative process that benefits from applied supports, but ultimately relies on the individual student to translate insights from both the formal course and peer mentoring into action. Even more, students may need to learn from setbacks, such as missed assignments, to see the viability of receiving reminders. Considering that several students expressed missed assignments as a problem, sometimes based on not receiving assistance, working toward help-seeking behaviors is essential.

The findings regarding executive functioning challenges also validate other studies, such as Jansen et al. (2017), who recognized organizational issues as a major barrier. As demonstrated by both my student participants and students in prior studies, challenges surrounding time management, task initiation, and other skillsets fail to dissipate with the addition of intentional education and accountability mechanisms. What these tools offer is a foundation of familiarity and support, further enhanced with continued reflection and engagement with duties like planning weekly schedules and breaking down projects.

### ***Leveraging Support and Building Self-Advocacy***

Neurodiversity, with its roots in promoting handling tasks independently and having autistic people communicate for themselves, has long embedded self-advocacy into its fabric (Sinclair, 2005). As Ortega (2009) noted, however, not everyone in the autism community knows how to or seeks engaging in self-advocacy. Part of this may harken back to overbearing parents who seek to influence their children's experiences, even if stemming from a good place (Morrison et al., 2013). Other autistic students may use their agency to determine whether or not they should disclose their disabilities and seek supports (Hotez et al., 2018). This represents an obstacle and opportunity in tandem.

While many autistic college students inherently find self-advocacy to be challenging (Hotez et al., 2018), the power of college autism transition programs like CACC showcases the vitality of formal and informal opportunities for students to make sense of and gain self-advocacy skills. As the findings show, students were more adept in recognizing the vitality of communicating for themselves and finding solutions to demonstrate self-advocacy, using the various forms of self-advocacy that Daly-Cano et al. (2015) noted in their study of college students with disabilities.

In particular, Daly-Cano et al. (2015) discussed how students engage in self-advocacy differently according to contexts and individual experiences. For example, proactive self-advocacy relates to taking charge before situations may unfold. Reactive self-advocacy results from addressing a challenging, sometimes unexpected circumstance after the fact. Retrospective self-advocacy unfolds when students reflect on past difficulties and determine how they would make changes to be more agentic moving forward. This collective approach to interpreting self-advocacy is applicable for autistic students, as evidenced in the study findings.

CACC programming has enabled Edweena to feel more empowered in communicating for herself and even advocating for others. “I definitely can go from like a beacon of hope to people who really just like need to go to college and need to connect with a community,” she said. In this manner, Edweena demonstrated proactive self-advocacy. Meanwhile, reactive self-advocacy was illustrative in the students who had to respond to situations right in the moment without much time to process. For example, Finn realizing he can incorporate the line “I need some space” into difficult conversations allows him to communicate needs without offering any specificity. Through sorting through various ways of solving problems and reflecting on past experiences, Andrew engaged in retrospective self-advocacy to inform future decisions. Collectively, these various forms of self-advocacy have enabled students to take charge of their experiences with greater confidence and independence.

Since many autistic students rely on people like their parents to make decisions for them, as opposed to drawing on their support (Alverson et al., 2019; Mitchell & Beresford, 2014; Peña & Kocur, 2014), the ability to engage in various self-advocacy techniques is crucial to their development. As illustrated, CACC staff viewed parents as helpful supports, though sometimes overbearing in a “helicopter” manner. Therefore, CACC’s role is to teach students to handle more skills on their own and still seek guidance from people they trust.

### **Challenging Neurodiversity**

Whereas the first set of discussion points echo issues inherent in Neurodiversity Theory, a few themes arose in reviewing dissertation data that defy the movement’s tenets. As demonstrated, Neurodiversity Theory is neither fixed nor explicit, thus allowing for much malleability in what points can be directly linked. Consequently, I view this section as a space to

highlight some unanticipated and even counterintuitive themes that stand in stark contrast to what Neurodiversity exemplifies.

### ***Battling Frustration and Fear***

While Neurodiversity recognizes the prominence of autistic people who may experience alienation (Straus, 2013), what initial texts failed to attend to in explicit ways is how autistic people become worn out and even scared over what their futures look like, in large part due to the ableist practices that consume their lives. More recently, some works have addressed how exhaustion from self-advocacy efforts and battling ableism can lead to burnout (e.g., Richards et al., 2019; Raymaker, 2020 Seidel, 2020).

In this way, despite differences in identities and life experiences, I draw parallels to racial battle fatigue, which illustrates how Black individuals experience exhaustion and stress in dealing with racist incidents (Smith, 2004). In starkly opposing ways – albeit perhaps not so for some Black autistic individuals – autistic people are consistently confronted with messages (verbal and implicit) that signal certain characteristics they express are inappropriate. A larger message is that they, as autistic people, enact characteristics deemed unacceptable and thus do not belong. Mounting frustration, surfacing perhaps even more so during college, a time when autistic people must handle more on their own and more seriously think about the future, can erupt. George described the frustration exploding “like a volcano.”

Several examples show the following: students’ frustrations with the neurotypical world, positioning them as the “other;” inner frustration they experience; and frustration with fellow autistic people. Thrawn, for instance, example, expressed feelings of dehumanization and ultimately frustration when he would be asked to share grades with his past peer mentor, as if he was not capable of doing so. This anecdote exhibited how occasionally being viewed or

discussed in a deficit-based way had made him wary of how (neurotypical) individuals in positions of power would interact with him. The idea that students must meet societal expectations of what is considered appropriate – whether in handling certain tasks, as in Thrawn’s case, or following norms like attending sporting events (Colclough, 2017) – signals lack of acceptance of differences that thus instigate frustration.

Consistent exposure to such negativity leads some autistic students to become aggravated with how their autistic characteristics surface. The most salient illustration of this came when interviewing Keith, who lamented “I don’t know what’s f---ing wrong with me.” He expressed this sentiment upon explaining how he had consistently dropped out of courses, been talked to in demeaning ways, and eventually internalized the harmful language. Such internalized frustration echoes what Mann and Karsten (2020) found in an autistic student engaged in conversational skills training. While rarely expressed in existent literature, likely due to the emergence of investigating autistic college students’ feelings about their identities, this point may have larger implications about how scholars generally *do not* ask questions about students’ emotions.

Though most autistic student participants rarely expressed being irritated with autistic peers – more so with the CACC programming where they were around autistic peers – a few exceptions exist. Stephen, who questioned the merits of his “iffy” autism diagnosis as a child, said he felt frustrated with his peers’ autism-related characteristics. These demonstrations of aggravation do not frame autism as a problem, or the autistic student participants as ill-tempered or irrational, but rather exemplify the longstanding ripple effects of ableism. Many neurotypical people do not know how to communicate with and support autistic people, leading autistic people to find fault in themselves, eventually prompting some of them to lack patience with

peers. The cycle continues, and without a societal shift on how we view autism and see autistic people as more agentic and astute than they are credited, such patterns will persist.

While I did not expect the role of frustration to appear as prominently as it had in this context, I also found myself experiencing some of the same sentiments as participants. I recalled experiencing my own frustration with how powerful figures often use demeaning language in describing autism, a topic I published on prior to the dissertation (Nachman & Brown, 2020), and even harkened back to my own discontent with my autistic characteristics as a child and adolescent, wanting to conceal my diagnosis. The experiences students shared with me, while sometimes different in nature and context, still resonated, particularly in my past opposition to associating with the autism community due to fears of further stigmatization. At last my own internalized ableism has diminished with further education I have conducted about autism, and entering new phases of my life. I wanted to ensure that my interpretations of students' frustrations do not exacerbate misconceptions of autism as a negative, yet also present an authentic perspective that the greatest obstruction is not necessarily the characteristics associated with the disability, but rather how these characteristics are perceived.

Not far off from frustration is fear, branching from both what the coming years hold in autistic students' development in making sense of how their autistic traits shape experiences, and in becoming adults like all humans face. While only emergent literature has illustrated autistic college students' trepidations, such as a "fear of the unknown" (Vincent, 2019, p. 159) or experiencing fears of autism-based stigmatization (e.g., Cai & Richdale, 2016; Frost et al., 2019; McMorris et al., 2019), this demonstrates a worthy avenue of exploration. One common fear exists: making mistakes because of autism-related characteristics. George wrote about this concern. "Life has no back button, yet this is one of those things I have to face," he noted.

George blamed himself for experiencing what he considered “missed opportunities” in life and shared apprehension of how self-defeating patterns would continue to manifest and compromise his ability to move forward in his career. Here we see how self-blame – another type of internalized ableism – could be compromising and consuming. Several students, including John and Keith, feared they would never obtain stable employment because of challenges surrounding task initiation and other forms of executive functioning.

One component of being independent that served as an ongoing struggle lied in learning how to drive. While about one-quarter of teenagers who are of age to get their license delay the process out of fear (Beck, 2018), the challenges are pronounced for autistic people who experience greater difficulties associated with distractions and overstimulation (Classen & Monahan, 2013). In my study, student participants, without being prompted, explained how they have either never driven or found driving to be distressing. Societal expectations regarding driving are prevalent and what we identify here is not only a fear of the act of driving among students, but also a fear of not conforming to societal standards. This once again harkens back to ableist mentalities. In essence, not driving, whether due to fears of having that responsibility, being distracted, or receiving backlash from parents, equates to not feeling “able” and thus not independent. Elizabeth did not see not driving to be a problem; on the contrary, she commended students for successfully navigating public transportation. She thus presented a counterargument of students using public transportation as an act of agency, illuminating how independence is in the eye of the beholder, and that driving need not represent liberation.

### ***Feeling Disconnected from the Autism Community***

While meeting new people and making friends is inherently difficult for many autistic people (e.g., Ashbaugh et al., 2017; Casement et al., 2017), this challenge also extends to



connecting with fellow autistic individuals. Perhaps antithetical to what one would expect, not all autistic students felt a sense of connectivity and community with fellow autistic peers in CACC. This challenges the notion of how Neurodiversity fosters belongingness among individuals who have shared experiences (Frost et al., 2019). In fact, some students, even those who possessed a sense of positive autistic identity, felt they could not relate to peers' autistic characteristics.

As illustrated, students expressed frustrations with their autistic peers based on their lack of similar interests and even manifestations of autism-related characteristics that did not relate to their own. Both students who engaged with CACC peers, such as Dennis and Thrawn, and even students who stayed apart from peers outside of courses, such as Andrew and Keith, expressed similar sentiments about not always relating to autistic peers.

The relative novelty of interacting with autistic peers accounted for some students' feelings of disconnect. "I'm having to learn how to interact with other autistics because I've spent my whole life trying to learn how to interact with neurotypicals," Charles expressed. As several students shared, this was indeed their first experience in interacting with other autistic people, thus making it difficult to possess the same level of insight and understanding as those who had previously been immersed in autism-specific programming. Though notions of disengagement from autistic peers were not fixed among neither students who immersed themselves in CACC nor students who did not want to participate, this trend signals an alarming trend. Akin to the previous point about frustration burgeoning to the extent that students perpetuate ableist tendencies, their experiences in feeling disconnect demonstrate division. The autism community need not be collectivist in working toward a common goal, or even having the same beliefs, but the implicit mindsets of an "us versus them" perspective has led to a range of challenges for both the students and the program.

Perhaps the most salient illustration of students seeing a divergence among their community surfaced when Charles explained that perhaps CACC should be more selective in its acceptance of new students. While in making this statement Charles expressed self-awareness that this was far from the most inclusive measure, he recognized that the disruption produced by some peers exacerbated frustration and lack of focus. Drawing the line, though, on what is considered unacceptable or unfavorable deserves further attention, particularly from the standpoint of who makes such decisions and why. Even more, with CACC's strengths-based approach, how can a program determine that tendencies considered unflattering by a predominantly neurotypical world (and autistic people who occupy such a world) should inhibit students from programmatic participation? On the contrary, how might CACC further enhance its educational initiatives among autistic people, some of whom hold internalized ableism, to generate understanding toward peers who present less socially desirable autistic traits? This signifies an area of further consideration for CACC staff in how to reduce disconnectedness among some of its students.

### **Extending Neurodiversity**

The final space worthy of exploration is how the dissertation findings work to broaden our understandings of some of the foundational aspects of Neurodiversity in having autistic individuals lead the charge in having their voices, rights, and unique qualities appreciated by all. Three main components work to tell this story: building autistic agency and pride; dismantling siloes and enhancing autism acceptance; and supporting students' strengths for college success.

### ***Building Autistic Pride***

Findings unwrap the prominence of how CACC students, over time, form a sense of autistic pride. To date few studies on autism in postsecondary education have uncovered

students' feelings of autistic pride (for exceptions, see Frost et al., 2019; Kapp et al., 2013). Frost et al. (2019) revealed how some participants attributed certain strengths, such as analytical skills, to autism. Among the most recent findings on the topic come from Riccio (2020), who suggests that strengths-based programming plays a major role in boosting autistic pride. Here we see the nascency of the term in the college-centered literature. While other articles have expressed how autistic students have described pride regarding accomplishments (Vincent, 2019; Wiorkowski, 2015), the absence of authors connecting the concept of pride with autism represents an area worthy of further exploration.

Hotez et al. (2018) employed a disability pride instrument to understand how students evaluated connections to their respective disabilities, though this was not constructed with an autistic lens. Recognizing this shortfall, it appears that incorporating the novel Autism Spectrum Identity Scale (ASIS) by McDonald (2016, 2020) would be viable in unraveling how students measure their sense of positive differences and abilities in relationship to their autism.

Students' illustrations of experiencing autistic pride in both implicit and explicit ways show how this abstract concept materializes when contexts enable them to see their identities and skills as valuable. Though only a few students, including Edweena and Finn, referenced participating in online communities for building community – often related to specialized interests or similar identities – existent literature portrays the power of these spaces for autistic people to make friends and even embrace their autistic identities (Jordan & Caldwell-Harris, 2012; Miller, 2017; Parsloe, 2015; Ringland et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2019). Clearly, students finding these avenues, whether on their own based on learning about their autism or seeking people who share the same passions, or more directly through a program like CACC building connection, can contribute to forming greater autism affiliation.

Indeed, while some students like Dennis expressed it feeling “nice being surrounded by other autistic people,” familiarity and time do not always equate to demonstrating pride. However, what becomes clear is that the more time that students affiliate with other autistic people, and possess a degree of openness in learning about their own identities and that of others, they may not see the distinct traits that once defined them as difficult, but rather different. One of the strongest examples of students exerting autistic pride emerged when Thrawn discussed how belonging to CACC enabled him to not feel shame over enjoying the experience of giving and receiving hugs, an action more delicately handled in the age of #MeToo and increased awareness of sexual harassment. Thrawn, despite having negative experiences where others view his autism as a problem, said CACC has allowed him to see the best in himself. In this way, Thrawn demonstrated how autistic pride materialized when realizing that he should not be concerned about demonstrating warmth via hugging – with the other individual’s consent, of course. He considers autism “a superpower.” Despite this succinct description, Thrawn has expressed viewing his identity as something that makes him special, albeit not in a condescending or negative way. By all intents and purposes, Thrawn found CACC as a space to feel proud about being autistic.

Although autistic pride does not always result in an “aha” moment of self-discovery where one experiences increased confidence or dignity in their autistic traits being viewed as positive or acceptable, over time autistic students’ experiences in affiliating with other autistic people may lead to cultivating such pride. Thrawn’s story, as one of many, shows the power that charges up when students feel a sense of agency and affiliation with being autistic.

### *Dismantling Siloes and Boosting Autism Acceptance*

As institutions boasting open admissions, community colleges may have fewer structural barriers than 4-year institutions (Kezar, 2002), and consequently be more collaborative. However, academia has historically faced challenges with having siloed units (e.g., Bok, 1986; Jackson et al., 2013). Each space operates relatively independently, and thus an institution may struggle to act cohesively and consistency. Altogether this manifests within a place like BMCC, full of many good and hard-working staff, they do not always understand each other's responsibilities and issues. For CACC, even though Elizabeth serves as a connector who bridged different settings and brought people together, it still exists within a distinct system lacking unity at times. "For whatever reason, departments have trouble partnering and sort of merging or building those relationships when they need to," Kelsey noted. Elizabeth was particularly frustrated with the pervasive idea that individuals had to work within a particular unit in order for partnerships to unfold.

There's no reason I have to be in the same (unit).' So that's that silo mentality. Like "you have to be in my division for you to collaborate with me" and I'm of the mind of like, "if I have to be in your division for me to collaborate with you, I don't want to be in your division because that makes no sense to me."

Such thinking has led CACC, a program within BMCC, to aim to figure out its place. While Neurodiversity as a concept does not address the notion of siloed units, its references to autistic people as fragmented serves as a foundation for how a community – whether in the form of people who share an identity (autism) or a common space (units within a community college) – benefit from learning with and from one another. That can only unfold with collaboration and common understanding.

When individuals exist in systems lacking interaction, this may also prime people to perhaps lack awareness and acceptance of colleagues' differences. This larger point can be extended to how autism acceptance can be enhanced when more campus units work in tandem to address prospects for students' success. The prominence of lack of autism acceptance on college campuses is evident across many studies that glean perspectives from neurotypical peers that illustrate biases against autistic students (e.g., Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014; Knott & Taylor, 2014). More engagement with autistic people can translate into neurotypical people more holding favorable perceptions (Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014) and better understanding autism (Nevill & White, 2011).

Autism acceptance is enhanced when people learn about autism, have direct contact with autistic people, and work with them. Wonder demonstrated the power of knowledge. "I had never taken a webinar or a course [about autism]," she shared. "I had never read a book. I'm like literally embarrassed to say, but nothing, I hadn't had [any] exposure to the wonderful population." However, through teaching CACC courses, she came to interact with and admire her autistic students. Gabriella pointed to a more systemic issue for the lack of autism education: a deficit of autism-centered discussions when discussing disability.

Autism education takes time and an openness to learn. Growing to not only be more aware, but also *accept* autistic individuals, is another story entirely. This translates to seeking their input and perspectives, as illustrated in BMCC administration gleaning input from CACC on how to reform their trainings to be more inclusive. That the whole first-year experience framework was being modified to reflect the standards and tenets that CACC modeled is a first step. Broadening autism acceptance, though, requires more extensive and consistent efforts, often by virtue of CACC shouldering the labor. However, CACC appears to establish a

foundation of understanding, led in great part by Elizabeth's active role on campus in faculty development.

Autistic students, too, carry the onus when talking about their identities in non-CACC spaces and leading peers to know about their experiences and how to best support them.

Ultimately, autism acceptance does not automatically trigger a completely different response to viewing or working with autistic students. It stems from continued education, dialogues, and measures that more saliently privilege the autistic voice, both in representation across digital spaces (as echoed in Nachman & Brown, 2020) and physical spaces like classrooms through instructors enacting more equitable measures (e.g., directly asking students how to make learning environments more comfortable; Austin & Peña, 2017). Implementing novel instruments like the Autism Attitude Acceptance Scale (Kim, 2020) may enable scholars to leverage such insights about autism acceptance, though enhancing it across campus spaces will require further education and experimentation – hopefully not entirely on the shoulders of autistic people.

### ***Supporting Students' Strengths for College Success***

Finally, this study extends the concept of Neurodiversity by viewing the possibilities of capitalizing on autistic students' strengths in not just society broadly, but in academia particularly. The multitude of unique skillsets and interests that autistic individuals possess serve as a platform for showcasing such strengths. While only a handful of studies have intentionally and specifically highlighted how these characteristics – deemed as positive and socially acceptable – present themselves in academic settings (e.g., Casement, 2019; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Ward & Webster, 2018), this research endeavor shows that following strengths-based approaches yield dividends to everyone.

Core to CACC's foundation is a model of finding and leveraging students' strengths, a framework building off of Rendón (1994) and similarly illustrated in similar studies that examine community college transition programs for minoritized student populations (e.g., Ankeny & Lehmann, 2018; Baber, 2018; Hallett et al., 2020). Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2017) also incorporated strengths into assembling an autism-centered program curriculum where autistic students would pinpoint and explain strengths in relationship to their neurodivergent identities. Clearly, a model where students can see the gifts that they possess, as opposed to just working on addressing what society deems as shortcomings, unlocks a world of possibilities. Recognizing the difficulties and identifying ways to adapt to them is also a core feature.

Case in point, being overwhelmed with many stimuli can be taxing for some autistic students, sometimes amounting to lack concentration and not know what to focus on (Van Hees et al., 2015). "I refer to as [myself] having the attention span of a squirrel," Sara Lyall described. Her autistic student peers expressed similar sentiments, even demonstrating this explicitly when losing track of the original questions I posed. "I think the train of thought has crashed into the station," Dennis quipped, finding his quirky sense of humor (a strength) as a way of deflecting the difficulty.

While losing focus can be compromising at times, on the flip side, when immensely interested or engaged in a task, particularly in quiet environments, autistic people can thrive (Wareham & Sonne, 2008). "Because of my extreme focus, I tend to sort of overdo it in my area of interest," John said. "I can get very nitty gritty." Yet this same form of intent concentration and investment can translate to success. Thrawn's expertise on sea animals allowed him to gain opportunities at the aquarium and be known by staff across various departments. Similarly, students expressed how many of their faculty have appreciated their level of interest in particular



topics. Likewise, CACC staff have seen the promise of students tapping into their interests. Elizabeth and Charlotte, in describing George and Finn, respectively, considered these students to completely immerse themselves into their assignments.

Edweena described her ability to work endlessly and hard, comparing herself to the Forrest Gump character in not knowing “when to stop” running.

It's a really good feeling to be able to like just feel like all my systems just like doing exactly what they're meant to be doing. Yeah, it definitely gives me a really unique and introspective advantage over other things that I'm really fortunate to have, and I... definitely don't appreciate it often enough.

Students' longtime passions appeared to serve as a viable mechanism for leading them down particular career routes. For example, Thrawn's investment in sea creatures enabled him to not only obtain a job at an aquarium, but also attain opportunities through colleagues to gain new skills. Many students' love of animals allowed them to form connections with others and demonstrate empathy, a trait often falsely listed as not being a capability of autistic people (Brewer & Murphy, 2016). Anne recalled that Julia's deep interests in animals, and in particular mice (such as fictional characters like Tutter from the *Bear in the Big Blue House* television show), provided joy and a base of “encyclopedic knowledge.” Julia has carried this drive for information into her studies, allowing her to be academically successful. Such stories echo other studies that focus on interests as the spark that lights the future (e.g., Briel & Getzel, 2014; Ward & Webster, 2018). “I always find autistic people fascinating to talk to when you get a conversation going,” Elizabeth said. “The more someone shares with you about their general interest, the more you can kind of gauge who they are as a person,” Frannie shared.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Addressing the desires and needs of autistic community college students, in their pursuits of achieving their academic, professional and social objectives, require the cooperative efforts of practitioners across different spaces on campus. As the findings of this study indicate, no one individual – or program, for that matter – can alone handle the work involved to offer support. The following implications derive from salient issues that have arisen for autistic college students.

### ***Educators***

At the instructional level, faculty would be wise to follow a routine with every course to earn the trust of autistic students – and students more broadly – who feel most comfortable with a consistent schedule. Assigning students to particular roles in group projects would reduce the uncertainty and distress associated involved in working with peers. Even more, ensuring that students have agency in completing projects that align with their interests and best modes of channeling knowledge lend credence to the principles of UD (Center for Universal Design, 1997). CACC, in its operations, follow this model, though this approach should not be limited to just teaching students with disabilities. Following these principles with students writ large, and paying particular attention to how these may benefit neurodivergent learners, also translate to the next very important approach: find students' strengths.

Unless instructors afford direct, open-ended opportunities for students to showcase their skillsets and talents, classrooms may be limited to outdated Socratic principles with the teacher in the front of the room and few opportunities for engagement. Course discussions, projects, and other learning-based outlets outside of the traditional lecture must allow for students to share their insights and interests. For autistic students, in particular, who may have long been derided for communicating too much about specialized passions, possessing such a space may be a

game-changer in how they see themselves and how others see their capabilities as learners. In this way, through the curriculum providing avenues for students to express their strengths, students may feel prouder about their distinct differences and further empowered to follow their passions.

### ***Program Staff***

For practitioners who lead college autism transition programs, or are in the planning stages of developing such programming, the study's findings indicate areas of opportunity for improvement. For one, there appear to be viable spaces for more directly attending to students' emotions explicitly in the curriculum. Whereas CACC touches on issues regarding self-regulation and metacognition, programming can be further enhanced through staff offering more frequent and explicit assignments that lead students to interrogate their feelings and how to work through them based on various scenarios that may unfold in life.

One common complaint among CACC students was in its prescriptive peer mentoring structure. Following data collection, Elizabeth and Taylor informed me of removing the student agendas during peer mentor meetings, resulting from complaints about this representing busy work – even though students had originally requested the incorporation of these agendas to fill out. This speaks to the iterative nature of peer mentoring and CACC's responsiveness to general student feedback. Opportunities for enhancing peer mentor programs include adopting several tactics. Allocating more time for students to talk through aspects of their personal lives – outside of the more rigid academic-centered tasks that typically encompass meetings – may help in both building trust and attending to the richness of students' lives. With more thorough training on how to identify students who express feelings of anxiety and depression, peer mentors can more confidently and easily direct students to campus counseling resources. Peer mentorship programs

may also consider building in social opportunities – including board game parties, movie nights, and trips to local museums – as ways to engage students in more informal settings. Peer mentors employing these techniques, in tandem, may reduce students’ sentiments of viewing these relationships as more procedural.

College autism transition program staff have long experienced challenges in negotiating relationships with parents in both setting boundaries and establishing expectations. Many parents, including those featured in the study, have long been greatly involved in their children’s lives. Relinquishing control of their children’s decisions does not come easily for many parents, concerned that their children cannot address certain tasks independently. Programs like CACC help students in asserting their rights and choices, even if it takes parents a while to follow suit in renouncing their more managerial characteristics. Though CACC establishes meetings with parents early on to clarify needing to act with greater restraint, that does not stop some parents from overstepping their bounds. It appears the best strategies that college autism transition program staff can enact in these situations is to engage in role playing or read case studies. Having parents think more intentionally and introspectively about their roles in their children’s lives – whether as “helicopter parents” or as useful supports on the side – may enhance the likelihood of relationships being more cooperative in nature.

Building community represents a chief role of college autism transition program staff, even more difficult to accomplish when not all students feel comfortable socializing in more common events, and particularly in light of a global pandemic. Staging virtual events, in the form of trivia, strategy games, and other activities may be an especially viable way of bringing autistic students together over shared interests while accounting for their distinct levels of comfort in engagement. In person socials, albeit limited for CACC during the time of data

collection, also appear to be opportune in helping students form connections outside of the academic aspects of the program. Video games and board games, movie nights, trips to the zoo or science museum, and campus theatrical performances are just a handful of activities that may align with students' passions and forge bonding.

Another salient finding from the dissertation entailed the prominence of frustration that autistic students experienced in higher education and, in particular, with some of the components of the college autism transition program. While all college stakeholders would be wise to brush up on how to support all students with emotional regulation – especially important for those who have experienced trauma, exploitation, and discrimination – college autism transition program staff are among the individuals who hold the closest contact with autistic students. Accordingly, programs should identify alternative outlets for students to express their frustrations in a constructive manner. While it appeared CACC peer mentorship meetings involved discussions of these irritants, perhaps they and other programs should explore non-traditional avenues for “releasing” such frustration. For example, through using CPS, perhaps they can work in tandem to determine physical activities like running, boxing, martial arts, rock climbing, and cycling. I envision that such dialogues may already be taking place in some instances, though I contend for these practitioners placing a greater emphasis on recommending these physical activities when stress and anger weigh down students.

### ***Institutional Leaders***

Finally, practitioners across all spaces of the community college – from the college autism transition program staff, to advisors and administrators – must work in building and enhancing collaborations with both one another and stakeholders outside the institution to support autistic college students. Alliances may take many forms. College orientation and

recruitment staff must work more closely with feeder high schools to smoothen transitions for incoming autistic college students. Although CACC already shoulders this work – and this is likely the case with comparable college autism transition programs – it should be a united mission to establish these connections early.

Administrators possess the power to leverage such possibilities, but they must first determine this as an institutional priority. Clearly, college autism transition programs such as CACC are not only effective in supporting the quality of students' experiences, but also their retention, a valuable metric that supports institutions' bottom line. The more that colleges and high schools can work in tandem to ease students' pathways, the more everyone benefits. Yet this duty may fall on overloaded and overburdened staff, such as college advisors or autism program staff. Thus colleges must see the fiscal importance of enlisting more staff to carry out these transition-based roles, or find ways to capitalize on existent staff to work overtime (with additional incentive structures) or engage in service work that relates to establishing these connections. Perhaps systemwide efforts could offset the burdens that individual institutions face. Bottom line: many colleges are driven by prestige and reputation. BMCC is an explicit example of how its CACC program represents an institutional hallmark garnering much positive attention and elevating student retention. Other colleges may see this as a model worth following. However, as articulated, institutions more generally must carry a greater proportion of the weight and funding, as well as offer support in building high school-based connections.

In addition to easing students' transitions into college, so must their transitions out. All college staff possess the opportunity to tap into their networks, both personal and professional, to pinpoint local employers that align with autistic students' interests and may even have autism workforce programs. Practitioners setting up shadowing days and informational interviews could

lead autistic students down sustainable career routes. Similarly, community college staff responsible for guiding students' transfer pathways must work more closely with 4-year institutional partners for finding programs that connect with students' passions. Complementing this tactic, staff must familiarize autistic students with the 4-year institutions through fashioning visit days, complete with sitting in courses, checking out housing and dining facilities, and meeting *current* autistic 4-year students, to gain comfort.

Perhaps one crucial element that yields the least institutional attention arrives in the form of policies and measures that bolster the recruitment, retention, and graduation of autistic college students. Imagine the changes that could unfold if both community colleges and universities implement specific protocols that work to elevate the numbers of autistic college students who successfully enter, experience, and exit their institutions. This requires the collective forces of high schools, postsecondary education institutions, employers, and autism community groups to not only collaborate, but also turn ideas into action.

Three examples across these three stages – entrance, experience, and exit – may help realize particular policies and measures. At the entrance stage, institutions can assign autistic students with a peer mentor – even if they lack an autism program – to help them navigate college, such as in studying, finding community outlets, and developing schedules. At the experience stage, colleges can establish more robust tracking systems that provide alerts to administrators if autistic students are struggling academically or engaging in misconduct, for instance. At the exit stage, programs within students' majors or fields of interests can set up systems for tracking long-term outcomes. That way we can have a better understanding of autistic students' pathways and determine what policies may better support employment that is neither limited in hours nor low in pay.

Finally, one responsibility that both practitioners and researchers – the next group highlighted in the implications – hold is making space toward working with and learning from one another. At the institutional level, campus institutional research (IR) offices should gather data on its college’s autistic student population and track their pathways. Such insights will guide practitioners on potential programming to implement or reform that may boost persistence and transfer rates. However, gathering rich information often rests on knowing what type of data to curate, hence prompting the need for IR and college autism transition programs and other units serving autistic college students to meet and hold these conversations. Outside of the institution, partnerships between community college autism transition programs and 4-year university researchers – as illustrated in this research project – show promise in instituting alliances that draw on the unique resources and insights that each group brings. Collaborations are mutually beneficial, breaking down the invisible boundaries that often separate practitioners and researchers, so long as the expectations are united, reasonable, clear, and prioritize students’ needs. These may not form quickly or even easily, but through one party extending an olive branch, an unexpected and fruitful array of possibilities may emerge.

### **Implications for Researchers and Directions for Research**

Researchers are primed to glean lessons from this study, as well as insights generated from existent scholarship on autistic college students, to enhance their aptness in gathering rich data on this student population. These takeaways may collectively inform the development of more thoughtful and thorough practices when aiming to learn about these students’ experiences.

#### ***Incorporate Theory***

Foundationally, researchers must employ theory to guide their work, which can be threaded in their methodological approaches and interpretation of findings. As illustrated in the



systematic literature review that commenced this endeavor, the absence of theory in the vast majority of studies on autism in higher education leads to a dismal lack of grounding research in commonly used frameworks, or even with emergent perspectives for that matter. Therefore, the studies are not framed with intentional, well considered viewpoints that tie together the various components. I would contend that Neurodiversity serves as a viable, autistic-centered framework that would behoove many scholars, though also recognize the necessity of particular student development theories or perspectives that attend to particular points. Ultimately, the mere use of integrating theories does not make studies stronger, nor appropriate, as I earlier referenced Fleischer (2012a) drawing on the deficit-based Goffman's theory of stigma (1963, 1990) that contended the necessity of autistic people conforming to neurotypical standards.

### ***Reframe Wording***

At the study's onset I also argued the vitality of avoiding deficit-based wording, in how I posed demographic survey and interview questions, depicted autistic individuals' experiences, and translated their own self-understandings of autism. Researchers possess a pivotal role in either perpetuating false beliefs or changing the paradigm when centered on a minoritized population, long overshadowed and communicated *for*. Many strategies work toward using more empowering and positive language that privileges autistic perspectives and avoids falling into common traps. For one, scholars can allow autistic people themselves define how they want to be described. Demographic data should not just allow participants to check off a box that asks if they have autism. Instead, they should consider employing an approach to what I offered: "how would you describe your autism identity?" and subsequently give a number of options, including an open-ended response option. Providing autistic people the opportunity to describe themselves, no matter the instrument or methodological technique, shows that *their* perspectives matter most.

### ***Utilize Alternative Methods***

Though I worked toward gleaning insights across various spaces, including demographic surveys, interviews, and written reflections, alternative means should be employed. I see Photovoice as an especially promising avenue in giving autistic people agency in how they view the world, though this is still relatively novel and used non-college-aged individuals including children (Ha & Whittaker, 2016) and adults (Krutt et al., 2018; Lam et al., 2020). Similarly, photo elicitation has been used with autistic people as a way of engaging with their responses to visual information (Danker et al., 2017). Other approaches that have not yet even been employed or perhaps conceptualized may work to fully include and draw from the expertise that autistic individuals bring to our understandings of this multifaceted identity. What matters is that researchers think outside the box in engaging with autistic college students, considering their levels of comfort and ease in channeling information depending on the data collection methods. The Coronavirus pandemic has further complicated traditional in-person engagement, but also broadened the possibilities of leveraging online means – including virtual interviews, text message/email observations, and digital written reflections, as I incorporated – in gathering material.

### ***Centering Student Perspectives***

Upon collecting data, researchers must work to both authentically share autistic students' journeys, preferably using their own words as much as possible to reduce the potential for distortion, and convey their own interpretations in an honest and non-condescending manner. As I have wrestled with how to balance both the good and bad experiences that student participants have shared with me, and specifically aimed to not focus too much on the challenges while also honoring what participants shared. Researchers must check their own biases and understandings

in presenting material that does not distort the truth, yet not also exacerbate poorly informed understandings of the autistic experience. Engaging in more intentional member checking, as in how I sent back summaries of interview interpretations to students, is a straightforward and thoughtful measure for ensuring that understandings are aligned. That said, the interpretation process still requires researchers to make their own calls in ultimately presenting the information in print. Through familiarizing themselves with studies on autism in postsecondary education, both that contain problematic language and others that are more mindful in wording, researchers may make more informed calls in describing autistic college students' experiences.

### ***Expand Topical Reach***

This study's findings point to several other spaces for investigation in future research. Unraveling how autistic college students manage stress is worthy of exploration. Existent studies, including Ames et al. (2016) and Hotez et al. (2018) have examined programs where mentors and students explicitly discuss stress. Other articles have incorporated points about stress reduction techniques (e.g., Van Hees et al., 2015; Ward & Webster, 2018). However, save for some exceptions like LeGary (2017), the absence of studies centered particularly on stress is absent, and considerably alarming given the high rates of anxiety and depression among autistic college students (S. Jackson et al., 2018). Furthermore, the role of stress in undermining students' focus and progress in pursuing their objectives, as articulated in many of my own student participants, cannot be understated. Researchers more intentionally uncovering how autistic college students view the sources of their stress, manage it (whether on their own or with others' support), and address it moving forward would be particularly fascinating in the worlds of both higher education and mental health.

Though my study participants had the option of nominating any important individuals in their lives for interviews, only a couple listed their fathers. No fathers participated, even when I reached out on multiple occasions. Though some stereotypes persist about disengaged fathers of autistic children (Keller et al., 2014), the absence of studies that directly involve them, lest the fathers of autistic college students (for exceptions, see Peña & Kocur [2013], Van Hees et al. [2018]), is alarming. Additionally, the lack of studies involving siblings of autistic college students echoes the call to involve more types of family members, beyond mothers, to communicate about the autism experience – in concert with autistic students, of course.

### ***Launch Longitudinal Work***

This study also sets up the foundation for the merits of engaging in longitudinal work involving autistic college students. Although my study only follows students at a few junctures over the course of several months, taking this approach allowed me to understand how they navigated various transitions, including the end and start of different terms and even the nascence of the Coronavirus pandemic. Tracking students over multiple years, however, require strong communication, incentivization, and resources.

Indeed, the NLTS-2 has tracked the same set of autistic students over time (Wei et al., 2017), but as stated, the data is outdated and not representative of students who did not receive special education services in high school, yet had an autism diagnosis. More robust and novel surveys conducted at the national level – perhaps drawing on the Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s (CIRP) *The Freshman Survey*, which has a question about students’ autism identities – represent a viable launching pad for mass-scale understandings (Sturm & Kasari, 2019). Even looking at individual programs and studies, which have argued the call for longitudinal work (e.g., Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017; Wiorkowski, 2015), are primed to handle

such work, particularly if they have a healthy sample size to draw from for following up. Following students' transfer and career pathways, vastly overlooked in the literature due to restraints regarding researchers' priorities and an emphasis on *transitions in*, would afford innumerable opportunities for identifying long-term outcomes.

### ***Explore Multiple Programs***

Additionally, understanding how autistic students experience programs across institutions – through more studies in the vein of Barnhill (2016) – would give perspective to the particular supports and mechanisms that enable students to fully engage in and draw benefits from programming. Foundational college autism transition program reports curated by Bradley E. Cox and colleagues – drawing from work that I have conducted alongside Catherine Tobin McDermott – is groundbreaking in showing programmatic characteristics and challenges by nearly 60 programs around the country. I will continue to contribute to these efforts in my own endeavor to determine how to best leverage the talents of autistic students engaged in these programs, though this cannot be a lone effort. And so, I put out the call to fellow researchers examining autism in higher education to look at students' experiences across similar programs, such as in how students find mentorship or learn how to advocate for themselves, to pinpoint the specific techniques that may be especially effective. Such work, whether in qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods research, will help in generating greater representativeness of the programmatic tools that work, what needs revision, and how students' experiences differ or relate based on a number of demographic and contextual characteristics.

## Conclusion

The roads that lead autistic students into, through, and eventually out of community college are lined with road signs that may direct them down unexpected avenues, often replete with many other “drivers” that contribute to their experiences. Sometimes these pathways are circuitous and hard to follow, particularly when distractions emerge from nearly every corner, unintentionally aiming to misroute them from reaching their distinct final destinations: finishing a course, completing CACC, obtaining an associate’s degree, landing a job, or even transferring to a 4-year institution. Other times, the signs are clear and easy to follow, particularly with the assistance of guided supports that enable them to steady the course. Ultimately, the destinations may diverge from their original expectations, particularly when on the road for a while, as the emergence of new interests, skillsets, and challenges amount to a bevy of messaging. Through the influence of CACC, as well as the new sets of experiences they encounter while at BMCC, the autistic students at the heart of this study have steered promising and, at moments, complicated pathways through the world of higher education.

This study, in embracing the opportunities associated with a Neurodiversity lens and gathering insights from a multitude of participants and sources of data, crystallizes our understandings of autistic college students enrolled in a community college autism transition program. It works to pave the road for the next set of scholars who learn from these students, and enables us to glimpse into the important work of the program staff, faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders who shape autistic students’ lives. Most importantly, though, it privileges the perspectives of autistic college students whose stellar insights are relayed in as comprehensive a manner as my resources allowed for this endeavor. As Charles said, “college is like a road-racing bike.” He elaborated:

There's gears. You can't just stop by, stop peddling, you've got to manipulate brakes. If you hit the wrong brake too hard, you go over the front handlebars. And then there's the whole issue of balancing everything going on in your life. On top of all that other stuff, the balance is crucial and there is nothing really for autistic students that takes the place of training wheels, and to me that is what these programs, and I know that there are other programs to some similarity at other colleges, but to me that's what these programs should be. And that's what (Elizabeth's) made this program for me, in, my opinion, at (BMCC) is training wheels. Yes, it's a big two-wheeled bike, but it's got training wheels on it because you're never going to fall over on that bike because of the training wheels. You can learn how to balance, you can learn how to ride a bike that's two wheels in a safer environment than just being thrown out of the deep end without water wings and “go sink or swim, kid, and good luck.” And so to me it's the reason why I'm doing this with you, why I did the interview, I've spoken at a couple of things with [Elizabeth, and this interview] is my way of paying this forward...

And very similarly, Charles' words resonate with my own reasons to conduct this research: to pay it forward. Autistic college students' contributions and experiences may very well alter the landscape of what higher education looks like, one that promotes greater understanding, inclusivity, and acceptance toward unique ways of learning and living. These students are at the forefront of this new wave of autistic individuals entering our colleges and impacting every person they touch along the way, myself included.

Though the roads may still be hard to follow and, as Charles described, it may feel like navigating college is akin to riding a bike, autistic college students are poised to follow

meaningful trajectories. In that pursuit they may find new, promising beginnings wherever the current roads they exist on may come to an end.



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Table 1.

*Information Extracted from Journal Articles**All Categories*

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*Basic information**Article title**Publication date**Journal title**Database utilized to obtain article**Keywords used to obtain article**Institutional context**Centered at community colleges (exclusively)**Included community college data (as part of sample)**Included autistic college student participants**Location (country/countries)**Study site**General article details**Primary topic**Purpose of study**Theories/models/paradigms referenced**Research design**Methodology**Data analysis**Population**Participant information**Findings**Interpretive information**Strengths of study**Weaknesses/limitations (authors notate)**Weaknesses/limitations (my thoughts)**Future directions (authors notate)**Future directions (my thoughts)**Strong quotes*

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Table 2.

*Descriptive Information of the Literature in Review (Abbreviated)*

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models /Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Accardo et al., 2019a	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	Four universities (two in Northeast, one in Midwest, one in West)	48 autistic college students
Alverson et al., 2019	<i>Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities</i>	N/A	N/A	YES	YES	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Northwestern state	5 autistic young adults
Ames et al., 2016	<i>Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	NO	YES	Mixed	Peer Mentorship model; Program Theory	Canada	York University	23 autistic student participants
Anderson & Butt, 2017	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	YES	YES	Qual	N/A	US.	Mid-Atlantic region	18 families (including autistic students and parents)
Anderson, 2018	<i>College &amp; Research Libraries</i>	N/A	N/A	YES	YES	Qual	Social Model of Disability	N/A	WrongPlanet website	Unknown

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models /Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Anderson et al., 2018	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	Australia	Universities in NSW and Australian Capital Territory	48 autistic college students
Anderson et al., 2019	<i>College Student Affairs Journal</i>	N/A	N/A	YES	YES	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Discussion board for autistic individuals	Autistic individuals (unknown <i>n</i> )
Ashbaugh et al., 2017	<i>Behavioral Department Bulletin</i>	ProQuest	Autism + community college	YES	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	Institutions in southern California	3 autistic college students
Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2012	<i>Equity &amp; Excellence in Education</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	YES	YES	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Five colleges, two universities in two states	14 autistic college students
Austin & Peña, 2017	<i>Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	YES	NO	Qual	Constructivism and Social Justice	U.S.	Two- and four-yr. colleges in southwest U.S.	9 faculty members
Bailey et al., 2020	<i>Autism</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	Midwest (unknown institution)	42 autistic college students
Barnhill et al., 2011	<i>Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	YES	NO	Quant	N/A	U.S.	U.S. higher ed institutions	87 higher education institutions

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Barnhill, 2016	<i>Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities</i>	Scopus	Autism + college	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	U.S.	U.S. higher ed institutions	30 college campuses
Bell et al., 2017	<i>European Journal of Special Needs Education</i>	ERIC	Autism + university	YES	YES	Qual	N/A	Ireland	20 secondary, vocational and community schools across the Republic of Ireland	6 autistic college students
Bellon- Harn et al., 2018	<i>Reading Improvement</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S. Australia , India, Canada and the United Kingdom	Websites across five country- specific search engines	53 websites
Briel & Getzel, 2014	<i>Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	YES	YES	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Virginia postsecondary institutions	18 autistic college students
Brosnan & Mills, 2016	<i>Autism</i>	ERIC	Autism + university	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	United Kingdom	"Well-regarded UK universities"	120 neurotypical U.K. college students
Brown, 2017	<i>Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	YES	NO	Quant	N/A	U.S.	Non-profit postsecondary education institutions in the U.S.	469 institutions

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Brown & Coomes, 2016	<i>Community College Journal of Research and Practice</i>	ERIC	Autism + Community College	YES	NO	Quant	Social constructionism; Pragmatism	U.S.	2-year public institutions	146 2-year college administrators heading disability service units
Cai & Richdale, 2016	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	YES	YES	Mixed	N/A	Australia	Four universities and four TAFE colleges	23 autistic college students + 15 relatives
Casement et al., 2017	<i>International Journal of Inclusive Education</i>	ERIC	Asperger + postsecondary education	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	Spain, England	Two university campuses (one in each country)	9 autistic college students
Chansa- Kabali et al., 2019	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	Zambia	University of Zambia	484 neurotypical college students, 4 autistic college students
Chown et al., 2018	<i>Journal of Further and Higher Education</i>	Scopus	Autism + post- secondary education	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	United Kingdom	U.K. higher education institutions	99 UK universities

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Colclough, 2018	<i>Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges</i>	N/A	N/A	YES	YES	Qual	Astin's Student Development Theory	U.S.	Public, urban, research- intensive doctoral institution in southeastern U.S.	5 autistic college students
Cox et al., 2017	<i>Journal of College Student Development</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	NO	YES	Qual	Astin's Inputs, Environments and Outcomes (I-E-O) model	U.S.	Midsized city in the southeastern U.S.	9 autistic college students
Cullen, 2015	<i>Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Five southeastern Pennsylvania universities	24 autistic college students
Dallas et al., 2018	<i>The Qualitative Report</i>	Scopus	Autism + higher education	YES	NO	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	Postsecondary education institutions	211 disability service providers
DeNigris et al., 2018	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + college	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	Urban college in Northeastern U.S.	21 autistic college student mentees, 16 student mentors (including 1 autistic)
Dymond et al., 2014	<i>Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities</i>	Scopus	Autism + university	NO	NO	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Large public research university in U.S.	10 parents + 6 university personnel

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Fleischer, 2012a	<i>Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research</i>	Scopus	Asperger + university	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	Sweden	Sweden higher education institutions	3 autistic students
Fleischer, 2012b	<i>International Journal of Rehabilitation Research</i>	ERIC	Asperger + higher education	NO	NO	Qual	N/A	Sweden	Sweden higher education institutions	3 relatives, 2 coordinators, 1 study adviser
Frost et al., 2019	<i>Autism in Adulthood</i>	N/A	N/A	YES	YES	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Midwest (unknown institution)	20 autistic college students
Gardiner & Iarocci, 2014	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + university	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	U.S.	Unknown university	202 neurotypical undergraduate students in an introductory psychology course
Gelbar et al., 2015	<i>Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine</i>	Scopus	Autism + university	YES	YES	Mixed - mostly quant	N/A	U.S.	No specific site	35 autistic college students
Gillespie- Lynch et al., 2015	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + college	NO	NO	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	Unknown institution	365 neurotypical college students
Gillespie- Lynch et al., 2019	<i>Autism</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	No	Quant	N/A	U.S. and Lebanon	U.S. university; Lebanon university	1076 college students (556 in Lebanon, 520 in U.S.)

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014	<i>Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities Journal of College Science Teaching</i>	ERIC	Autism + college	NO	NO	Qual	Mindblindness. Weak Central Coherence theory of autism. and executive functioning challenges	U.S.	New England college	18 faculty members
Gobbo et al., 2018	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Liberal arts college	12 faculty
Gurbuz et al., 2019	<i>PLoS ONE</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	United Kingdom	United Kingdom universities	26 autistic college students, 158 neurotypical college students
Hamilton et al., 2016	<i>Autism in Adulthood</i>	Scopus	Autism + university	NO	NO	Quant	Kirkpatrick's four level model of training evaluation	Australia	Curtin University	7 peer mentors
Hassenfeldt et al., 2019	<i>PLoS ONE</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Quant	N/A	U.S.	Unknown university	92 graduate teaching assistants
Hamilton, et al., 2016	<i>Autism</i>	Scopus	Autism + university	NO	NO	Quant	Kirkpatrick's four level model of training evaluation	Australia	Curtin University	7 peer mentors
Hillier et al., 2018		ERIC	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	University of Massachusetts Lowell	52 autistic college students



Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models /Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Hotez et al., 2018	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	Scopus	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	New York institution	24 autistic college students
L. Jackson et al., 2018	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + college	NO	YES	Quant	N/A	U.S.	Research institution in southeastern U.S.	3 student participants
S. Jackson et al., 2018	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	YES	YES	Quant	N/A	U.S., United Kingdom, and Canada	Higher education institutions (mostly in the U.S.)	56 autistic college students
Jansen et al., 2017	<i>European Journal of Special Needs Education</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Quant	N/A	Belgium	Flanders, Belgium higher education institutions	43 autistic college students, 250 college students w/o disabilities, 30 student counsellors
Karola et al., 2016	<i>Australian Psychologist</i>	Scopus	Autism + postsecondary education	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	Ireland, United Kingdom	Northern Ireland	Northern Ireland college students (unknown <i>n</i> )
Kirby et al., 2019	<i>Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	NO	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Unknown institution	7 mothers of autistic high- schoolers

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Knott & Taylor, 2014	<i>International Journal of Inclusive Education</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	United Kingdom	University of Reading	4 autistic college students, 9 staff members
LeGary, 2017	<i>Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	7 New England colleges	10 autistic college students
Lei et al., 2019	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Quant	N/A	United Kingdom	Autism Summer School programme at unknown niversity	Study 1: 10 incoming autistic college students; Study 2: 28 incoming autistic college students, 112 typically developing incoming college students
Lei et al., 2020a	<i>Autism</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Quant	N/A	United Kingdom	Unknown university	28 autistic university students; 28 typically developing university students
Lei et al., 2020b	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	United Kingdom	Autism Summer School Programme	122 autistic students

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Lizotte, 2018	<i>International Journal of Education and Practice</i>	N/A	N/A	YES	YES	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Large southwestern metro area and mid-size U.S. city	6 autistic college students
MacLeod & Green, 2009	<i>Studies in Higher Education</i>	ERIC	Autism + university	NO	NO	Qual	N/A	United Kingdom	Unknown institution	2 autistic college students
MacLeod, 2010	<i>Journal of Assistive Technologies</i>	Scopus	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	United Kingdom	Unknown institution	6 autistic college students
MacLeod et al., 2013	<i>British Journal of Special Education</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Qual	Social Identity Theory and Social Categorisation Theory	Unknown (assume United Kingdom)	Unknown institution	6 autistic college students
MacLeod et al., 2014	<i>International Journal of Research &amp; Method in Education</i>	ERIC	Asperger + higher education	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	Unknown	Three higher education institutions	10 autistic college students
MacLeod et al., 2018	<i>International Journal of Inclusive Education</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	United Kingdom	5 higher education institutions in the United Kingdom	16 autistic college students
Madriaga & Goodley, 2010	<i>International Journal of Inclusive Education</i>	ERIC	Asperger + higher education	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	United Kingdom	Unknown institutions	8 autistic college students

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Matthews et al., 2015	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + university	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	U.S.	Large, public 4- year university in southwestern U.S.	224 neurotypical undergraduate students
McKeon et al., 2013	<i>Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	NO	NO	Mixed	N/A	Unknown (assume U.S.)	Private urban university	69 full-time faculty members
McMorris et al., 2019	<i>International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	Canada	York University	45 autistic college students
Mitchell & Beresford, 2014	<i>British Journal of Special Education</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	England	Unknown	18 autistic students
Morrison et al., 2013	<i>Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability</i>	ERIC	Asperger + postsecondary education	NO	NO	Qual	Seven Vectors of Development	United States	Chapter of Autism Society of America	4 parents + 2 college personnel
Nachman & Brown, 2020	<i>Community College Journal of Research &amp; Practice</i>	N/A	N/A	YES <sup>7</sup>	NO	Mixed	Critical Theory	U.S.	Community college websites	94 community college websites
Ncube et al., 2019	<i>International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Quant	N/A	Canada	Autism Mentorship Program (AMP) at university	23 autistic college students

<sup>7</sup> Data did not include human participants, but rather community colleges as participants.

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Ness, 2011	<i>Mentorship &amp; Tutoring: Partnership in Learning</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Qual	Self-regulated learning and the Self-Regulation Empowerment Protocol	U.S.	Public university in the northeast U.S.	3 autistic students
Nevill & White, 2011	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + college	NO	YES	Quant	N/A	U.S.	Large public university in southeast U.S.	652 neurotypical student participants
Obeid et al., 2015	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	Scopus	Autism + university	NO	No	Quant	N/A	U.S., Lebanon	Large, urban public U.S. university, private Lebanese institution	346 U.S. neurotypical college students, 329 Lebanese neurotypical college students
Peña & Kocur, 2013	<i>Journal of Applied Research in the Community College</i>	N/A	N/A	YES	NO	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Southern California community colleges	16 mothers, 2 fathers of autistic students
Ponomaryova et al., 2018	<i>Higher Education Studies</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	Israel	Ariel University	103 college lecturers
Reed et al., 2016	<i>Exceptionality</i>	ERIC	Autism + Community College	YES	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	Community college in southeast U.S.	3 autistic students
Retherford & Schreiber, 2015	<i>Topics in Language Disorders</i>	ERIC	Asperger + college	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire	34 parents and autistic student participants

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Richardson, 2017	<i>Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance, and e-learning</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Quant	N/A	United Kingdom	Open University	552 autistic students
Roberts & Birmingham, 2017	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + university	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	Canada	Simon Fraser University	9 autistic college students + 9 college student mentors
Roux et al., 2015	<i>Autism Research and Treatment</i>	ERIC	Autism + two-year college	YES	YES	Quant	N/A	U.S.	Across U.S.	Students from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)
Sarrett, 2018	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	YES	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	Online	66 autistic college students
Scheet et al., 2019	<i>Autism in Adulthood</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	University of Idaho	12 autistic college students
Searle et al., 2019	<i>Advances in Autism</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	U.K.	University in United Kingdom	19 autistic college students

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Shattuck et al., 2014	<i>Autism Research and Treatment</i>	ERIC	Autism + college	NO	YES	Quant	N/A	U.S.	National dataset	120 autistic college students
Shmulsky et al., 2017	<i>Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability</i>	ERIC	Autism + postsecondary education	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	4-year private liberal arts college in the Northeast	23 autistic college students
Siew et al., 2017	<i>PLoS ONE</i>	Scopus	Autism + university	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	Australia	Curtin University	10 autistic college students
Smith, 2007	<i>College Student Journal</i>	ERIC	Asperger + higher education	NO	NO	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	U.S. postsecondary education institutions	29 disability service staff members
Someki et al., 2018	<i>Research in Developmental Disabilities</i>	Scopus	Autism + college	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	Japan, U.S.	7 Japanese universities (5 metro, 2 rural) and 1 public university in eastern U.S.	365 U.S. students and 212 Japanese students
Stronach et al., 2019	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	U.S.	Midwestern university, state fair	153 university students, 325 community members
Sturm & Kasari, 2019	<i>Autism</i>	N/A	N/A	YES	YES	Quant	N/A	U.S.	CIRP Freshman Survey (national dataset)	2211 autistic college students, 2061 neurotypical college students

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Thompson et al., 2019	<i>Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Quant	N/A	Australia	Unknown institutions	23 autistic university students, 19 graduate student mentors, 12 parents, 3 disability staff
Tipton & Blacher, 2014	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + Community College	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	U.S.	Southwestern U.S. university	1,057 faculty, staff, and students
Tops et al., 2018	<i>Learning and Individual Differences</i>	Scopus	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	Belgium	Unknown institution	40 autistic college students, 65 neurotypical college students
Underhill et al., 2019	<i>Communication Education Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	NO	Mixed	Model of Stigma Communication	U.S.	Unknown university in Appalachia	216 basic communication course university students
Van Hees et al., 2015	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	Belgium	Unknown institution	23 autistic college students
Van Hees et al., 2018	<i>Educational Action Research</i>	ERIC	Autism + university	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	England	Writers Project in England	7 autistic college students



Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models /Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
Vincent et al., 2017	<i>Educational Action Research</i>	ERIC	Autism + university	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	England	Status Writers Project	7 autistic college students
Vincent, 2019	<i>Autism</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	England	England	21 autistic young adults
Ward & Webster, 2018	<i>International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education</i>	Scopus	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	Australia	Medium-sized, urban Australian university	4 autistic student participants
Wei et al., 2014	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	ERIC	Autism + Community College	YES	YES	Quant	N/A	U.S.	National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) data	190 autistic college students
Wei et al., 2016	<i>Remedial and Special Education</i>	ERIC	Autism + 2-year college	YES	YES	Quant	N/A	U.S.	NLTS2 data	660 autistic youth
Wei et al., 2017	<i>Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities</i>	ERIC	Autism + college	YES	YES	Quant	Social Cognitive Theory and Social Cognitive Career Theory	U.S.	NLTS2 data	150 autistic college students
White et al., 2016	<i>Research in Developmental Disabilities</i>	Scopus	Autism + university	YES	YES	Mixed	Chickering and Riesser's (1993) Seven Vectors of Student Development	U.S.	Unknown institution	10 autistic college students, 32 parents, 40 school/college personnel

Author(s), year	Journal	Database	Keywords used in systematic search	Comm. college participants in sample	Included autistic student participants	Methodology	Theories/Models/ Paradigms Referenced	Country	Study site(s)	Sample
White et al., 2017	<i>Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disorders Journal</i>	ERIC	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Quant	N/A	U.S.	Unknown institution	8 autistic college students
White et al., 2019	<i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i>	N/A	N/A	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	U.S.	Mid-sized university in northeast U.S.	214 undergraduat e college students
Wiorowski, 2015	<i>The Qualitative Report</i>	Scopus	Autism + higher education	NO	YES	Qual	N/A	U.S.	Unknown institutions	12 autistic adults, some of whom attended college.
Wood & Freeth, 2016	<i>Journal of Educational Issues</i>	ERIC	Autism + university	NO	NO	Quant	N/A	U.S.	United Kingdom university	163 university students (Study 1); 42 university students (Study 2)
Zeedyk et al., 2018	<i>Autism</i>	Scopus	Autism + college	NO	YES	Mixed	N/A	U.S.	All 4-year universities in Southern California (Study 1); Research university in Southern California (Study 2)	13 autistic college students, 18 college faculty (Study 1); 132 college faculty (Study 2)

Table 3

*Overview of Study Participants and Methods of Data Collection*

Participant Group	<i>n</i>	Surveys	Interviews	Observations	Written Reflections
Autistic Students	13	X	X	X	X
People Students Nominated	9		X		
CACC Program Staff	4		X		
College Admin, Faculty and Staff	9		X		

*Note:* One participant (Elizabeth) belonged to two groups: *People Students Nominated* and *CACC Program Staff*

Table 4

*Data Analysis Strategies*

		First Cycle Coding			Second Cycle	General Analysis Approaches	
Method of Data Collection		Descriptive Coding	In Vivo Coding	Emotion Coding	Axial Coding	Narrative Analysis	Descriptive Analysis
<b>Data Type</b>	Surveys						X
	Interview	X	X	X	X	X	
	Transcripts (Students)						
	Interview	X	X	X	X	X	
	Transcripts (Non-Students)						
	Observation Notes	X	X	X	X	X	
	Written Reflections	X	X	X	X	X	
Documents	X	X		X			

Table 5

*Student Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Autism Identity	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Other Disabilities (in Students' Words)
Andrew	White	18	Asperger's	Straight/Heterosexual	Male	Dysgraphia
Charles	White	42	Asperger's	Straight/Heterosexual	Male	N/A
Dennis	White	19	Asperger's	Straight/Heterosexual	Male	ADHD
Edweena	White	21	Autistic	Lesbian	Trans* Female	Anxiety
Finn	White	19	Autistic	Straight/Heterosexual	Male	Deaf/Hard of Hearing
George	Asian; White	20	Autistic	Straight/Heterosexual	Male	Anxiety; Visual Impairment
John	White	19	Asperger's	Straight/Heterosexual	Male	Anxiety; ADD; Depression; OCD
Josh	White	18	Autistic	Straight/Heterosexual	Male	Heart Block
Julia	Asian; White	22	Asperger's	Bisexual	Female	Anxiety; ADD; Depression; OCD
Keith	White	18	Autism Spectrum	Prefer not to answer	Male	Anxiety
Sara Lyall	Black/African American; White	18	Autism Spectrum	Asexual	Genderqueer/Gender Nonconforming	N/A
Stephen	White	25	Autistic; Asperger's	Straight/Heterosexual	Male	ADD; Depression; "Maybe Anxiety"
Thrawn	Hispanic/Latinx; White	20	Autistic	Bisexual	Prefer not to answer	Anxiety; Depression; Developmental Coordination Disorder; Dysgraphia; Specific Learning Disorder (Mathematics)

*Notes:* Edweena was originally diagnosed with Asperger's, though now considers herself autistic; Stephen indicated that he was tentatively diagnosed with autism at a young age

Table 6

*Composition of Student Participants*

Demographic	Interviewed Students (13)	All Students Who Completed Survey (22)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White/Caucasian	100.0% ( <i>n</i> =13 )	70.37% ( <i>n</i> =19)
Black/African American	5.88% ( <i>n</i> =1)	3.70% ( <i>n</i> =1)
Hispanic/Latinx	5.88% ( <i>n</i> =1)	11.1% ( <i>n</i> =3)
Asian	11.76% ( <i>n</i> =2)	11.1% ( <i>n</i> =3)
Middle Eastern or North African	0%	3.70% ( <i>n</i> =1)
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
Heterosexual	61.54% ( <i>n</i> =8)	68.18% ( <i>n</i> =15)
Gay	0%	0%
Lesbian	7.69% ( <i>n</i> =1)	4.55% ( <i>n</i> =1)
Bisexual	15.38% ( <i>n</i> =2)	9.09% ( <i>n</i> =2)
Queer	0%	0%
Asexual	7.69% ( <i>n</i> =1)	9.09% ( <i>n</i> =2)
Prefer not to answer	7.69% ( <i>n</i> =1)	4.55% ( <i>n</i> =1)
Not listed; please fill out	0%	4.55% ( <i>n</i> =1)
<b>Gender Identity</b>		
Male	69.23% ( <i>n</i> =8)	59.09% ( <i>n</i> =13)
Female	7.69% ( <i>n</i> =1)	18.18% ( <i>n</i> =4)
Trans* Male	0%	0%
Trans* Female	7.69% ( <i>n</i> =1)	4.55% ( <i>n</i> =1)
Genderqueer/Gender nonconforming	7.69% ( <i>n</i> =1)	9.09% ( <i>n</i> =2)
Prefer not to answer	7.69% ( <i>n</i> =1)	4.55% ( <i>n</i> =1)
Not listed; please fill out	0%	4.55% ( <i>n</i> =1)

Demographic	Interviewed Students (13)	All Students Who Completed Survey (22)
<b>Family Income Level</b>		
Low income	8.33% ( <i>n</i> =1)	5.00% ( <i>n</i> =1)
Low-middle income	8.33% ( <i>n</i> =1)	20.00% ( <i>n</i> =4)
Middle income	16.67% ( <i>n</i> =2)	15.00% ( <i>n</i> =3)
Upper-middle income	58.33% ( <i>n</i> =7)	45.00% ( <i>n</i> =9)
High income	8.33% ( <i>n</i> =1)	5.00% ( <i>n</i> =1)
Prefer not to answer	0%	10.00% ( <i>n</i> =2)
<b>Religion</b>		
Atheism	38.46% ( <i>n</i> =5)	27.27% ( <i>n</i> =6)
Buddhism	0%	0%
Christianity	23.08% ( <i>n</i> =3)	22.73 ( <i>n</i> =5)
Hinduism	0%	0%
Islam	0%	0%
Judaism	0%	9.09% ( <i>n</i> =2)
Sikhism	0%	0%
Prefer not to answer	7.69% ( <i>n</i> =1)	13.64 ( <i>n</i> =3)
Not listed; please fill out	30.77% ( <i>n</i> =4)	27.27% ( <i>n</i> =6)

*Notes:* Race/Ethnicity: 1) Numbers may not add up to 100% due to some students identifying as multiracial, and thus being able to select multiple options; 2) Additional groups listed included “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander,” “Alaska Native,” “Prefer not to answer,” and “Not listed; please fill out” ; Sexual Orientation: Student listed “Pansexual”; Gender Identity: Student listed “I don’t know”; 3) Among the options that participants filled out for “not listed; please fill out” under religion were “Agnostic,” “Undecided,” “None,” and “Agnostic Episcopalian”

Table 7

*College Administrators, Faculty and Staff: Participant Info*

Pseudonym	Interview Format	Campus Role	Primary Field(s) of Study (if applicable)	Context of Connection to CACC Program
Aztec	In person	Administrator	Education	Works w/ Elizabeth on campus diversity trainings
Craig	In person	Administrator	History	Former CACC instructor; Elizabeth's supervisor
Ellen	In person	Faculty	Communication	CACC instructor
Grace	In person	Faculty	Political Science	CACC instructor
Jake	In person	Faculty	Education; Wellness	CACC instructor
Laura	In person	Conduct Staff	Counseling	Works w/ Elizabeth regarding CACC students facing conduct issues
Mackenzie	In person	Academic Advisor	N/A	Leads campus tours that visit CACC; mother of program graduate
Nigel	In person	Administrator	Geology	N/A
Wonder	In person	Faculty	Exercise Science and Wellness	CACC instructor

*Note:* Each of these participants engaged in one interview, and shared their field of study during the interview context.



Table 8

*People Nominated by Students: Participant Info*

Pseudonym	Interview Format	Relationship to Student	Student Nominee(s)	Highest Level of Education
Amanda	Skype – audio	Mother	Dennis	Bachelor’s degree
Anne	Phone	Mother	Julia	Some college
Charlotte	Phone	Peer Mentor	Finn	Graduate degree
Daisy	Phone	Mother	Keith	Unknown
Elizabeth*	Skype – audio	Instructor	George, Thrawn	N/A
Heather	Phone	Wife	Charles	Unknown
Kelsey	Phone	Supervisor	Edweena	N/A
Rachel	Phone	Mother	Andrew	Associate’s degree
Pete	Skype – video	Mother	John	Graduate degree

*Note:* Elizabeth, CACC director, spoke about two students who nominated her; student participants indicated *parental* level of education in their initial surveys, hence why some are listed as “Unknown” and staff members were not asked about level of education (“N/A”)

Table 9

*CACC Program Staff: Participant Info*

Pseudonym	Interviews (Quantity)	Interview Format(s)	Program Role(s)
Elizabeth	5	In person, Skype – audio	Director; CACC Instructor
Frannie	1	In person	Staff Member; Peer Mentor
Gabriella	1	In person	Staff Member; Peer Mentor
Taylor	3	In person, Skype – audio	Manager; Former Staff Member and Peer Mentor

*Note:* Elizabeth also served as a person nominated for student interviewees; she was interviewed seven times total

Table 10

*Autism-Related Characteristics as Described by Students and Nominees*

	Andrew	Charles	Dennis	Edweena	Finn	George	John	Josh	Julia	Keith	Sara Lyall	Stephen	Thrawn
Aloof, Quiet	X					X+	X			X	X		
Affectionate, Kind, Sensitive		+	X			X		X		+			X
Can Become Easily Frustrated						X	X+			+			
Communicates with Directness, Honesty	+	X+		+									X
Dislikes Eye Contact		X			X		X				X		
Dislikes Small Talk	X	X			X								
Engages in Stimming							X+						
Enjoys Research	+					X							X
Expresses Empathy	+	X		X						+			
Experiences Face Blindness	+					X							
Experiences Hypersensitivity	X+	X	+	X+	X	X	+			X	X		
Faces Challenges with Organization, Time Management	X+		X		X	X	X	X	X+	X	X	X	
Fears Driving	X		X+	X		X	X+						X
Finds Nonverbal Communication Difficult		X+		X	X	X			+	+	X		X
Finds Social Interactions to be Challenging	X+	X+			X+	X	X			+	X	X	
Goes on Tangents		X	X+		X	X							X

	Andrew	Charles	Dennis	Edweena	Finn	George	John	Josh	Julia	Keith	Sara Lyall	Stephen	Thrawn
Handles Emotions Differently, More/Less Intensely than Peers		X+		+		X			X		X		
Holds Strong Memory		+		X					+		X		
Lacks Focus	X		X		X	X					X	X	
Mask(s/ed) Autism-Related Traits		X+		X		X			X				
Possesses Strong Hyperinterests	X	X+	X+		X	X	X+		X+				X
• Animals, Nature		+			X	X	X	X	+	+	X		X
• Books, Reading			X+		X		+		+		X		
• Computers, Video Games	X+		X+	X		X	X	X	X	X+	X	X	X
• Star Wars			+			X			X+				
Struggles with Comprehension, Procedures			+						X+		X		
Struggles with Task Initiation	X		X		X		+	X	X+	X	X	X	
Struggles with Self-Advocacy	X+	+	X		X		X				X		+
Takes Things Literally		+		+					X		X		
Uses Humor, Sarcasm			X			X			X				X

*Notes:* Josh, Sara Lyall, and Stephen did not feature any nominated person; *X* denotes student described this characteristic in themselves, whereas + denotes the nominated person described this characteristic in the student; the absence of a mark does not mean the characteristic is not applicable to the student, as it may also mean it simply did not emerge during a conversation.

Table 11

*Student Study Participants: Engagement in Methods*

Pseudonym	Survey Completed	Interviews (Quantity)	Interview Format	Shared Feedback on Interview Summaries	Observation (Format and Context)	Written Reflections Completed
Andrew	Yes	2	Skype (audio)	Yes (both)	In person – peer mentor meeting	Yes
Charles	Yes	1	Skype (audio)	No	Virtual – email exchanges	No
Dennis	Yes	2	In person; Phone	Yes (both)	Virtual – peer mentor meeting	Yes
Edweena	Yes	2	In person	Yes (both)	In person – meeting with supervisor	Yes
Finn	Yes	2	In person; Phone	Yes (both)	In person – peer mentor meeting	Yes
George	Yes	2	In person; Skype (audio)	Yes (both)	In person – peer mentor meeting	Yes
John	Yes	2	Skype (video)	Yes (second)	Virtual – email exchanges	Yes
Josh	Yes	1	Skype (video)	No	In person – peer mentor meeting	No
Julia	Yes	2	In person; Phone	Yes (both)	Virtual – text message exchanges	Yes
Keith	Yes	2	Skype (audio)	Yes (both)	In person – peer mentor meeting	Yes
Sara Lyall	Yes	2	In person; Skype (audio)	Yes (second)	In person – peer mentor meeting	Yes
Stephen	Yes	2	In person; Phone (audio)	Yes (both)	In person – peer mentor meeting	Yes
Thrawn	Yes	1	Skype (video)	Yes	In person – peer mentor meeting	No

*Note:* Nine additional students completed surveys, but did not participate in subsequent aspects of the study.

Table 12

*Students' Impressions of Helpful and Unhelpful Teaching Techniques*

Helpful Teaching Techniques	Unhelpful Teaching Techniques
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing computer usage (Finn)</li> <li>• Being accessible to students (Edweena)</li> <li>• Complementing course lectures with thorough PowerPoint slides (Julia)</li> <li>• Delivering a clean lecture (Edweena)</li> <li>• Ensuring anonymity of students with disabilities (Finn)</li> <li>• Explaining concepts with clarity (Sara Lyall)</li> <li>• Featuring example of high-quality assignment for students to reference (Julia)</li> <li>• Following up material with assignment or quiz to ensure students have content knowledge (Stephen)</li> <li>• Listing notes on board (George)</li> <li>• Offering validation (Edweena)</li> <li>• Providing class flow and structure (Edweena)</li> <li>• Sharing content across multiple modes, including visuals, audio (George)</li> <li>• Showing compassion to students (Sara Lyall)</li> <li>• Writing on the whiteboard (John)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing students to go on tangents (George)</li> <li>• Avoiding answering students' questions (Edweena)</li> <li>• Demonstrating examples that do not tell students what they should be doing (Julia)</li> <li>• Featuring unclear syllabus (Edweena)</li> <li>• Offering little context to rubrics (Julia)</li> <li>• Providing little material on course management site (George)</li> <li>• Showing PowerPoint slides, writing notes on board too quickly (John)</li> </ul>

Table 13

*Recommendations for Enhancing CACC Program*

Recommendation	Examples	Quote
Address Disruptive Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Call out students who talk in a misogynistic manner (Charles, Edweena)</li> <li>• Provide students with flexibility in seating based on peers' smells (Thrawn)</li> </ul>	The instructor should say "if something makes you uncomfortable, please come up, let us know and we will do something about it" (Thrawn)
Apply Course Concepts More Explicitly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illustrate classroom concepts to personal situations and life (Anne)</li> <li>• Demonstrate concepts in more depth (Sara Lyall)</li> <li>• Use case studies and practical real life examples (Stephen)</li> </ul>	"maybe go a bit more in depth and actually consider not only what it is and why it's useful, but how do we improve it" (Sara Lyall)
Emphasize Social Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help students design customized pleasantries to use in social situations (Andrew)</li> <li>• Provide more explicit social skills trainings (Frannie)</li> </ul>	"They (students) recognize that, you know, the population is skewed towards neurotypical people and they wanted to be able to kind of meet halfway I guess in a more skilled way, in a better place of understanding and they didn't feel like that was facilitated." (Frannie)
Enhance CACC Staff-Instructor Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Account for each student's unique "wavelength" (Thrawn)</li> <li>• Foster dialogue more between CACC instructors and staff to ensure aligned expectations with curriculum (Edweena)</li> </ul>	"it feels like the classes are maybe just slightly a little removed from the program in a way that it could be a little more tighter knit perhaps" (Edweena)
Enlist More Personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Garner more funding toward paying staff (Taylor)</li> <li>• Hire teaching assistants, if funding permits (Jake)</li> </ul>	"I would like to fully use as much as we can of that to hire more people that are just part time staff and then I would love to also have more money for the full time people" (Taylor)

Recommendation	Examples	Quote
Impose Limitations on Entrance into Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Screen out students who cannot fulfill program expectations and who may act disruptively in class (Charles, Jake)</li> </ul>	“There's the kids that with that need help... and then there's the kids that are never going to quite get there... but in the process of slowing down more to help them, the kids that could be helped more are being helped less, if that makes sense.” (Charles)
Leverage Faculty Talents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversify instructors by enlisting faculty across disciplines (Wonder)</li> <li>• Provide teacher mentors (Ellen)</li> </ul>	“it would be nice if other instructors from other fields willingly, you know, could teach a class and their expertise or in their field.” (Wonder)
Offer Alternative Programming for Socials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect CACC students with a neurotypical student not serving in the program – as opposed to a peer mentor – to serve as a buddy at campus events (Rachel)</li> <li>• Establish friendship groups based on students’ similar interests (Ellen)</li> <li>• Offer events that cater to interests beyond video games (Julia)</li> </ul>	“I also think it would be really great if we could have more events that aren't just for the computer crowd” (Julia)
Provide Point Person for Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designate staff member to navigate difficult situations (Anne, Ellen, Rachel)</li> </ul>	“place (students) with somebody with some continuity or somebody who could help you navigate when things are difficult or you're having trouble in classes where people have discussions.” (Anne)
Revise Aspects of Peer Mentor Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allocate more time toward non-academic aspects of students’ lives during peer mentor meetings (Andrew)</li> <li>• Allow students to opt out of completing template messages to instructors (Anne, Julia)</li> <li>• Enlist more peer mentors (Taylor)</li> <li>• Keep students with the same peer mentors across terms (Anne, Daisy, Julia)</li> </ul>	“Have the peer mentor focus less on school and more on the rest of your life when you're succeeding in school” (Andrew)

*Note:* Seven students, when asked about recommendations to make for the program, did not have any examples to offer, even if they indicated disliking aspects of CACC.



### Appendix A: Researcher Memo

I embarked on this dissertation project with four years of experience in developing scholarship on autism in higher education, and 27 years of experience in living as an individual with Asperger's. Throughout this dissertation process I have come to grips with my iterative identity that is consistently moderated by appreciation of terminology – gradually using identity-first language like *autistic* alongside person-first language of *having Asperger's* – and new understandings of autism itself. Here I detail my journey in covering this dissertation research and what I wrestled with in the field that informed my work. Where to start than from the beginning.

While I was formally diagnosed with Asperger's at age 8, I always knew that I was not *normal*, language that I now would frame as ableist and even deficit-based to some extent. My interests varied from the other children my age; instead of playing team sports and video games, I was more interested in drawing maps, playing with my Disney figurines, and designing transportation systems for my Hot Wheels cars. The imaginative play defined my being, almost as much as the particularities, ranging from lining up all of my toys to “directing” my relatives in scripts I wrote and filmed, almost always becoming frustrated if the lines were not uttered *just right*. I was extremely gifted in math, working often two or three grades ahead of me, though I struggled in reading comprehension. A voracious reader, but I never realized I had to interpret what I had in my hands. The social challenges were abundant, in that I had trouble making conversation and keeping up with dialogues. Reading nonverbal communication was essentially nonexistent. The list goes on. I was *different*. And these *differences* made me feel like a pariah. I was always in *Brett's world*, as my parents described it, when I would stare into space and my mind would wander off.

After my diagnosis I was engaged in an inordinate number of therapies – occupational, speech, language, you name it – to address the differences that defined my daily life. These occupied much of my after-school time for the forthcoming three years, by which point my parents and I realized that the best schooling outcome for me would be to learn from home. From there my mom home-schooled me for the next six years, a time in which I both thrived in gaining confidence in masking my less favorable autism-related characteristics, and concurrently struggled in pushing myself to be my best possible self. I kept myself very socially isolated, to my parents' behest, because of my fears of being judged, mainly based on my autistic identity (which I was now able to conceal more effectively). What they did not realize, and what I did not come to own until my time in college, was that part of that fear derived from wanting to be accepted as gay male in a society that had not yet legalized same-sex marriage. I wrestled with these identities, both of which I could limit in their salience, and this inhibited my ability to present an authentic individual. I immersed myself in my studies – mostly related to literature and writing, ironically enough, now that I had mastered reading comprehension and communication-related challenges – and centered on my career goals of becoming a journalist.

Upon starting Scottsdale Community College as a dual-enrolled college student – I was completing my last year of high school – I blossomed in ways I could never have thought

imaginable. For the first time I was taking ownership over my life experiences, from choosing courses and participating in student organizations, to making acquaintances and setting up meetings with my college professors. I only knew one autistic peer at the college, whose prominence of negative traits were often met by scoffs and derision in our student organization. I tried to make him feel welcome as much as possible, and also offered recommendations on how he could more effectively acclimate to the group. Concurrently I reconciled how my autistic traits would surface, perhaps most apparently so when dealing with subordinates on the campus newspaper who felt threatened by my leadership. While in front of my colleagues I aimed to come off as fair and amiable, each day I returned home experiencing major bouts of stress and anxiety. I was pursuing my dreams of entering journalism, but upon not being re-elected to the editor role, based on false, negative accusations made of my leadership, I felt weak. That the decision came from the sole person I had confided in about my autistic identity at the college to that point only reinforced the blow. As I was navigating this roadblock, I had been accepted to one of the best journalism schools at the country and was concluding my run as president of our campus honor society. Major triumphs defined my final semester as a community college student, from a full-ride scholarship to Arizona State University to garnering honors for my student leadership. But the *defining moment*, as I have now described it to countless peers, was being selected as our college's student commencement speaker.

Since I had long been visible to most of our campus community through my various campus roles and engagement in the college, I committed myself to writing and delivering the most impactful speech I could craft. I rehearsed the seven-minute script so much that I practically memorized it. And once I was on the stage to say the words "as someone with Asperger's," I had proven to myself that the greatest risk was not disclosing my identity, but rather preventing people from *not knowing* my identity. While this "coming out" speech was not accompanied by disclosing my sexual identity as well, a journey that took its own course and has now represented a good deal of my recent scholarship, it epitomized the idea of liberation. Following the standing ovation and hugs from faculty who I greeted as I walked outside the auditorium, I was met by the mom of my autistic peer who thanked me, crying, for putting a spotlight on autism. That was just one of many. And little would I have realized it in that moment that the *defining moment* was not the pomp and circumstance of holding the stage, but being an autistic self-advocate.

While my transfer student experience was not filled with the same joys that marked my time at community college, the lessons I learned from navigating this transfer period guided my leadership and recalibration in career pursuits. I was now much more open about being autistic, and realized that for anybody to truly know me, I would appropriately incorporate this into conversation. And such guided my entrance into graduate school, realizing that studying higher education would fulfill my curiosity for being intellectually stimulated about academia and contributing to its evolution as a community college scholar. It only took a few weeks for me to realize my dissertation topic: autistic community college students. Obtaining validation from Dr. Xueli Wang, my advisor, professor, and academic idol, further solidified this direction.

The next several years entailed immersing myself in the limited, albeit growing, base of literature on autism in higher education, building my community of scholars on this front, and even spearheading an entire virtual network of international researchers and practitioners on this topic that now boasts nearly 500 individuals on the list-serv I manage. During my graduate school

years, I had come to be known as *the* autism higher education scholar on our campus, and gradually one of the main figures in this movement on a much more global scale. With this burgeoning spotlight I felt a growing onus to be more transparent about not only my connection to the autism community, but also as a gay male. My scholarship and public presentations provided an ideal venue toward that end. I have discussed the strengths and challenges associated with each, as well as how they intersect. Ultimately, my research would reach an apex with the most ambitious project to date: my dissertation in examining the experiences of autistic community college students. Everything I had accomplished to date had built this infrastructure of knowledge and scholarship. Now I had to deliver.

I had planned to spend four weeks at Blue Moon Community College (BMCC) across two research trips, though the second trip was upended by COVID-19. My deep appreciation for having the two most eye-opening and empowering weeks of my career are unending. New, unexpected questions about my identity emerged as I made sense of my connection to the community. Of course, I had interacted with other autistic individuals before, but never before had I immersed myself in a setting where everyone shared a common experience, yet in many ways could not relate to one another.

With each interview and observation I digested the reality that I felt an immediate kinship to the students, often seeing myself in these students, many ten years my junior, and also a disconnect with the manifestations of their autistic traits. Almost all of the students were more comfortable with and open about their autistic identities than I was at their juncture. Many experienced trauma and bullying I could not relate to, though distant memories of being ridiculed in elementary school surfaced once again. Nearly each student had a co-occurring disability, most related to mental health, which only magnified the labels they carried. I did not. With each conversation, I compared the manifestation of students' autistic traits with my own. Once again, I saw distinctions, in that the obviousness of my autism generally only presented itself outside of public view, whereas the opposite was true of most everyone I talked with. And through all of this I realized that most of these students felt different from their autistic peers, whose characteristics were more aligned with each other than my own characteristics with theirs. Entering this experience I knew I would feel like an *other* due to my privileges as a doctoral student, researcher, and other powerful roles. Yet all of these interactions contributed to a duality between embracing a special connection with them and internalizing an outsider status.

Every day, as I returned from campus to work on my writing, memoing, and transcribing, I tried to process this conflict. *Was I engaging in internalized ableism by privileging my ability to mask certain traits? Did I really understand what the students described about their distinct qualities, both strengths and challenges? Had I made them feel comfortable enough by sharing, at the onset, about my own common identity as an autistic (former) community college student?* Eventually I came to accept that these questions and doubts were okay, and that being transparent about these challenges in my dissertation work would add to its authenticity. Sure, I had learned how to mask traits that would be more negatively associated with autistic stereotypes. However, the program's philosophy of leveraging strengths enabled me to appreciate that while we as autistic people need to adjust to the world, the same courtesy should be extended to us as autistic people.

My patience and flexibility, traits often not as strong among members of the autism community, were tested on a good handful of occasions with my participants. Some forgot about our interviews, requiring quick adjustments in formatting and rescheduling. I realized that reminders were a necessity. At other times I learned how to weave through tangents and redirect students to the main interview topics. But whatever frustration I experienced as a researcher in working with participants who were not always the most reliable were complemented by the joyous moments when they did not see the gap between researcher and researched. Thrawn proudly showcased photos of torturous insects that mount the heads of their prey on their backs. Dennis described to me his fervor for video games before our interview. Julia excitedly showed herself dressed up in Cosplay at Star Wars Celebration upon us discussing our mutual love for “the Force.” These instances are just a few examples of when I laughed and learned from the students, and when I separated my frustration of their organizational challenges with a reality check that everyone possesses difficulties that negatively, if unintentionally, impact others. The endless email reminders to have students set up their follow-up interviews with me and complete their written reflections also presented a reflective moment. I realized that it is not only the autism-related characteristics that account for some executive functioning challenges, but also being an emerging college student wielding more independence and responsibility. The autism piece only enhances certain challenges that are sometimes inherent in the larger college student population. I had read about this in the literature, and I had experienced some of these insights through previous experiences. Not until I had been fully embedded in my dissertation had I welcomed this reality. Such a treasure.

And so I walk away from this dissertation research with such admiration of and appreciation for my autistic student participants, in particular, for what they have taught me about their autistic identities, experiences, and trajectories. I came to value the true *spectrum* of autistic students, not only in how their autism-related characteristics presented themselves, but also through the ways they navigated life as college students. They are figuring out their futures, fraught with challenges not based on just the barriers that a neurotypical world establishes, but the more universal difficulties surrounding finding a suitable career, building relationships, and carving out new paths. I have faced a similar, but different journey, one that unexpectedly prompted me to return to my roots. I never had the opportunity to participate in a community college autism transition program, an experience that would have likely changed my own conceptions of my identity. But through my vantage point I stand outside, looking in, with great hope that these students’ defining moments are not just based on coming to terms with their identities, but by dismantling the ableism that pervades throughout society and in ourselves. They have the supports, the skills, and the specialties that can change the world for the better. I hope to be there to watch them (continue to) illuminate our global neighborhood with new ideas and insights.

## Appendix B: Survey for Participants

English

### SURVEY INSTRUCTION

#### Informed Consent

#### Welcome to the research study!

I ask that you read the following background information and instructions, so that you can understand the expectations of the research study and determine if you would like to participate. The instructions will take you 5-10 mins to read.

#### What is the purpose of the study?

I am interested in understanding how the [redacted] program (formerly known as [redacted]) at [redacted] contributes to your academic, emotional, professional, and social experiences in higher education. The purpose of the study is to learn about your participation in this program, college experiences, identities, and life pursuits in order to provide recommendations on how [redacted] (and similar programs) can be enhanced. The insights you share with me will also help community colleges better understand the strengths, skillsets, and needs of students who are part of the autism community, which may lead them to improving the inclusivity of the campus climate. I will also be enlisting the perspectives of individuals who have been influential in your college experience, as well as gathering insights about [redacted] from its program staff and [redacted] administrators.

#### Who is the researcher conducting this study?

My name is Brett Ranon Nachman, and I am an autistic self-advocate who is a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Most of my research is centered on understanding the depictions and experiences of autistic college students. If you participate in this study, your information will be greatly valued, as it will play a role in shaping the findings of my dissertation project. This study is incredibly important to me, and I will do my very best to honor your time, experiences, and insights.

#### What types of benefits come from study participation?

While there are no guaranteed benefits through participating in the study, you may find this experience to be worthwhile for multiple reasons:

**1) You will have the opportunity to share your story and experiences**, which may provide a space for self-reflection. This study will also give you the opportunity to educate other individuals about your experiences in being part of the autism community as a college

student. Your insights may work to reduce misconceptions and stigmas about autism, and help others recognize the unique contributions and perspectives you have to bring to society.

2) You will have the chance to offer suggestions about how the [REDACTED] program may be improved, as well as mention how it has supported your college experience.

### What will study participation entail?

The research study includes five main steps.

- 1) Complete the following **survey** (approx. 10-15 mins); select individuals will be invited to participate in the following four components.
- 2) Meet with me (in person, or via Skype, if you would prefer) for a **first interview** (approx. 45-60 mins). Interview topics would be shared with you in advance, so that you could prepare for the conversation.
- 3) Allow me to **observe a meeting that you have with your peer mentor OR observe another meeting you have with a staff member, instructor, friend or group on campus** (approx. 30 - 60 mins)
- 4) Conduct **written reflections of your college experiences** (at your leisure). Following the first interview, I would provide you with examples of guiding topics to write about.
- 5) Meet with me (in person, or via Skype, if you would prefer) for a **second interview** (approx. 60-90 mins). Interview topics would be shared with you in advance, so that you could prepare for the conversation.

Research participation is **completely voluntary**. If you choose to participate in the study, **you are free to leave the study at any point**.

### Will I be receiving anything through participating in the study?

Yes, if you are asked to participate in an interview, you **would receive a small token of appreciation**. Upon completing the first interview and observation, you would receive a **\$25 Amazon gift card**. Furthermore, if you complete both the written reflections and second interview, you would receive **an additional \$25 Amazon gift card**.

### Who is eligible to participate in the study?

You must **both** be a participant in the [REDACTED] program at [REDACTED] and at least 18 years of age to participate.

### Are there any risks to study participation?

If you are willing and able to participate in the study, the main risks will entail talking about potentially sensitive topics related to your identities, autism diagnosis and disclosure, and life concerns and stressors. However, **you can choose not to answer any questions that**

make you feel anxious, uncomfortable or distressed. You will also be provided with interview questions in advance to have time to review the content and determine what you would like to share and/or discuss. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any point.

**Will personal information be kept private and protected?**

Yes, I will be storing all of the information you share with me on a secure database through the University of Wisconsin-Madison. While there is a risk for breach of confidentiality, to reduce this risk, the data will be stored in a secure server through UW-Madison Box. During the first interview, you will be asked to create a pseudonym, or fake name, to be used to maintain your anonymity. This means that your identity will not be revealed. Similarly, a pseudonym will be applied to the college and college program to conceal their true names. Please know that my intention is to develop journal articles and presentations based on the findings I gather from this study. Therefore, please be aware that any information, or data, you share with me will be retained indefinitely for use in possible future research endeavors, though identifying information will not be connected. As a researcher, it is my first priority to protect your identity and personal information.

**Will all individuals who complete the survey be asked to participate in other parts of the study?**

I welcome your interest and participation in the study. While not all individuals who complete the survey will receive an invitation to participate in the other parts of the study (interviews, observation, written reflections) at this point in time, your insights through completing the survey would be very helpful. I encourage you to complete as many of the survey questions as possible to increase your likelihood of being selected to participate in the main parts of the study.

**Who to contact if questions come up during any part of the study?**

Please contact either of the following:

Brett Ranon Nachman, Doctoral Student at University of Wisconsin-Madison

Phone: 602-618-0000

Email: [bnachman@wisc.edu](mailto:bnachman@wisc.edu)

Dr. Xueli Wang, Doctoral Adviser to Brett Nachman | Professor at University of Wisconsin-Madison

Phone: 608-263-5451

Email: [xwang273@wisc.edu](mailto:xwang273@wisc.edu)

If you are not satisfied with the response of the research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason.

Please note that this survey will be best displayed on a laptop or desktop computer. Some features may be less compatible for use on a mobile device.

- I CONSENT to participating in the research study.
- I DO NOT CONSENT; I do not wish to participate in the research study.

### Identities

The first several questions ask you to share information about your identities.

What is your age?

What is your race/ethnicity? (Select ALL that apply)

- White/Caucasian
- Black/African American
- Hispanic or Latinx
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Alaska Native
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Prefer not to answer
- Not listed; please fill out



What is your sexual orientation?

- Straight/Heterosexual
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Queer
- Asexual
- Prefer not to answer
- Not listed; please fill out

What is your gender identity?

- Male
- Female
- Trans\* Male
- Trans\* Female
- Genderqueer/Gender nonconforming
- Prefer not to answer
- Not listed; please fill out

What is your religion?

- Atheism
- Buddhism
- Christianity
- Hinduism
- Islam
- Judaism
- Sikhism
- Prefer not to answer
- Not listed; please fill out

How would you describe your family's income level?

- Low income

- Low-middle income
- Middle income
- Upper-middle income
- High income
- Prefer not to answer
- I am not sure

### Important People

This next question relates to study participation among individuals who you are important in your life. Please write the names and contact info of **at least 2** individuals who are important to you in supporting your college experience. For instance, these may include relatives, friends, college instructors or advisors. If you are invited to participate in the study, I may reach out to the individuals you mention, so that I can interview them.

#### Person #1

Name	<input type="text"/>
Relationship to You (e.g., parent, instructor, friend)	<input type="text"/>
Email Address	<input type="text"/>
Phone Number	<input type="text"/>

#### Person #2

Name	<input type="text"/>
Relationship to You (e.g., parent, instructor, friend)	<input type="text"/>
Email Address	<input type="text"/>
Phone Number	<input type="text"/>

#### Person #3 (not required, but appreciated)

Name	<input type="text"/>
Relationship to You (e.g., parent, instructor, friend)	<input type="text"/>
Email Address	<input type="text"/>
Phone Number	<input type="text"/>

Person #4 (not required, but appreciated)

Name

Relationship to You (e.g., parent, instructor, friend)

Email Address

Phone Number

### Autism and Disabilities

The next set of questions ask about your autism identities and disabilities more generally.

How would you primarily describe your autism identity?

- I identify as being autistic
- I identify as having Asperger's
- I identify as being on the autism spectrum
- None of these descriptions are applicable; please fill out

At what age were you diagnosed with autism? (If you are not sure, please write "not sure")

Did you receive special education services during high school, as it pertained to your autism identity?

- Yes
- No
- I do not remember

Have you been diagnosed with any of the following disabilities or impairments? (Select all that apply)

- Brain injury
- Deaf/hard of hearing

- Learning disability (e.g., dyslexia, ADD, ADHD); please specify
- Medical disability (e.g., chronic fatigue syndrome, diabetes); please specify
- Physical disability; please specify
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Psychiatric disability (e.g., anxiety, depression); please specify
- Visual impairment
- Other not listed; please specify
- I do NOT have another disability or impairment

### Educational Experiences

The next set of questions ask about you and your family's educational experiences.

What is/was your MOTHER'S highest level of education that she completed?

- Less than high school diploma
- High school degree or GED
- Some college
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree
- Don't know
- I do not have a mother
- I have two mothers (if so, please write each person's highest level of education completed)

What is/was your FATHER'S highest level of education that he completed?

- Less than high school diploma
- High school degree or GED
- Some college
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree

- Don't know
- I do not have a father
- I have two fathers (if so, please write each person's highest level of education completed)

BEFORE this quarter, how many quarters had you been enrolled as a student at [REDACTED]

- This is my first quarter
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more

Is [REDACTED] the first college where you have been enrolled as a student?

- Yes
- No (please specify the college(s) and/or universities where you were previously enrolled)

How long was your gap from the time you completed high school to being enrolled as a college student?

- Less than 6 months
- Less than 12 months
- 1 - 2 years
- More than 2 years

When did you start participating in the [REDACTED] program [REDACTED] at [REDACTED]?

- First quarter of being enrolled at [REDACTED]
- Second quarter of being enrolled at [REDACTED]
- Third quarter of being enrolled at [REDACTED]
- 1 year or after being enrolled at [REDACTED]

What is your current GPA?

- 2.00 or below
- 2.01 - 2.49
- 2.50 - 2.99
- 3.00 - 3.49
- 3.50 or above

What is your enrollment status?

- Full-time student
- Part-time student

What field(s) of study are you pursuing? (please fill out; if you are unsure, please write "not sure")

How many hours a week do you work for income?

- Less than 5 hours
- 5 - 10 hours
- 11 - 20 hours
- 20 or more hours
- I do not have a paid job

What is your housing status?

- Live at home with relatives
- Live with roommate(s)
- Other (please specify)

What are your goals through attending ██████████? (please select all that apply)

- Earn a certificate

- Earn an associate's degree
- Transfer to a university
- Earn a Bachelor's degree
- Attend graduate or professional school
- Work part-time
- Work full-time
- Enroll in the military
- Engage in a service organization
- Other (please specify)

Is there anything else you would like me to know about your education and/or identities?

### Further Study Participation

If you would be interested in being contacted for an interview, and other parts of the study (including an observation, written reflections and second interview), please share your name and contact information below.

Name

Email Address

Phone Number

### Thank You

Thank you for completing the survey. I appreciate your time and willingness to participate. If you indicated interest in participating in other parts of the study, I **may** get in touch with you over the next several weeks.

## Appendix C: Recruitment Message

Hi [student name],

My name is Brett Nachman, and I'm leading the research study on the [CACC] program. As you may recall, you filled out the survey [date listed here] to indicate your interest in study participation, and I would like to have the opportunity to interview you about the program. I am excited to learn from you about your college and program experiences.

At this time, I ask that you complete the following tasks:

**1) Read over the attached consent form** (this provides you with more context on the study, including the various tasks and info on receiving gift cards).

**2) Review the interview questions (attached)** that I would ask you during our first interview. You are welcome to let me know if you do not feel comfortable answering any of the questions. You can also let me know if you seek clarification on any of the questions.

**3) Fill out your interview availability.** I will be visiting [BMCC] from Feb 3-14. Please review the time slots available in my calendar. At this point I ask that you either sign up for a time directly within the calendar OR email me the top three time slots that work for you (I can follow up to confirm). If you have any questions, let me know. You are also welcome to be interviewed via Skype, if you would prefer to not speak with me in person. ***Please indicate your availability by Thurs, Jan 30.***

Thanks,  
Brett



## Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview 1 Protocol for Autistic Students

### Interview 1

#### Childhood, Family & Other Important People

1. Can you share with me some examples of important individuals in your family (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins)?
2. Can you briefly tell me about the individuals you nominated as important in shaping your college experience?
3. Why did you list these individuals as important in preparing your college experience?
4. In what ways did your parents or other important individuals in your life (for instance, relatives, friends and teachers) help you prepare for college?

#### College

5. How did you decide where to attend college?
6. What were your expectations of what college would be like?

#### Identities

7. Do you remember when you were first diagnosed with autism?
  - a. (If yes), what were your thoughts and reactions?
  - b. (If no), when did you realize you had autism and what were your thoughts?
8. How would you describe autism to people who are unfamiliar with autism?
9. What are the most common qualities that people misunderstand about autism?
10. In what ways would you say autism impacts your life currently?
11. In what ways is autism important to your identity, if at all?
12. What are some other important identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, culture, religion, disability) that shape who you are?

#### [CACC Program]

13. How did you first find out about [CACC]<sup>8</sup>?
14. What have been your favorite aspects of participating in [CACC]?
15. How do you think [CACC] could be improved?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share about [CACC] at this point?

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<sup>8</sup> Pseudonym used here in lieu of actual name.