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Dedication

To my husband, my children, and my students.

Acknowledgments

They say it takes a village to raise a child, but I would argue that it also takes a village to raise a doctoral student. I would not be where I am today without my village, and I am so thankful for each and every person who walked with me on this path.

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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vii
LIST OF TABLES.....	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES	xv
ABSTRACT.....	xvi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Problem Statement	1
Significance of Study	2
Research Questions	4
Hypotheses	5
Conclusion	6
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	8
Method	8
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.....	9
Screening Procedures.....	10
Summary of Included Articles	11
Data Extraction and Coding.....	12
Inter-Rater Reliability	14
Findings	15
Study Methodology.....	15

Recruitment Methods.....	15
Participants.....	16
Study Characteristics	17
Study Quality	18
Survey Components	19
Qualitative Methods.....	19
Themes.....	21
Academic Needs and Supports	21
Social Needs and Supports.....	24
Secondary Themes	27
Self-Determination Skills and Needs.....	27
Academic Accommodations	29
Tertiary Themes	30
Mental Health/Comorbid Diagnoses.....	30
Sensory Concerns.....	31
Parental Involvement and Supports	32
Dedicated Program Space	32
Balancing Personal and Academic Lives.....	33
Independent Living	33
Career Development	33
Autism Support Programs.....	34
Shmulsky et al.	34
Sullivan	36

Viezel et al.	37
Discussion	38
Implications for Implementation.....	38
Future Research for Further Understanding	40
Limitations	41
Conclusion	42
CHAPTER 3: METHOD	44
Research Design.....	44
Positionality	46
Theoretical Framework.....	48
Participants.....	48
Data Collection	54
Survey Instrument.....	54
Semi-Structured Interviews	56
Data Analysis	56
Final Codebook.....	58
Trustworthiness.....	59
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	61
Research Question One.....	62
Survey Results	62
Quantitative Interview Results.....	69
Qualitative Interview Results.....	70

Research Question Two	84
Decision-Making Processes	84
Collaboration with Stakeholders.....	91
Barriers to Providing Services	94
Research Question Three	100
Program Effectiveness	100
Summary of Results.....	111
Research Question One.....	111
Research Question Two	112
Research Question Three	113
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	115
Research Question One.....	115
Provision of Services and Supports Meeting the Identified Needs of Autistic College Students.....	116
Provision of Services and Supports Not Meeting the Identified Needs of Autistic College Students.....	122
Discrepancies Between Survey and Interview Responses.....	125
Summary	126
Research Question Two	126
Decision-Making Processes	126
Collaboration with Stakeholders.....	128
Barriers to Providing Services	129

Summary	131
Research Question Three	131
Practices Found to be Beneficial.....	132
Practices Found to be Less Beneficial	134
Summary	135
Limitations	135
Limitations Related to the Survey.....	136
Limitations Related to the Interviews	137
Limitations Related to Bias.....	139
Implications.....	140
Implications for Practice	140
Mental Health Support.....	140
Subject-Specific Tutoring	142
Faculty Mentorship	143
Future Research	145
Sustainability of ASPs and the Long-Term Impacts on Program Participants and the Institution	145
Parental Involvement in ASPs	147
Independent Living Skills Development and Training.....	148
Inclusivity of ASP Design and Implementation	149
Inclusion of Student Voices	150
Conclusion	151
REFERENCES	154

APPENDIX A: <u>D</u> ATABASES SEARCHED WITHIN EBSCO COLLECTION	216
APPENDIX B: CODEBOOK: SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	218
APPENDIX C: STUDY RECRUITMENT EMAIL – SURVEY AND INTERVIEW	220
APPENDIX D: STUDY RECRUITMENT EMAIL – SURVEY ONLY	221
APPENDIX E: STUDY RECRUITMENT EMAIL – INTERVIEW ONLY	222
APPENDIX F: SURVEY PROTOCOL	223
APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	228
APPENDIX H: WEBSITE REVIEW	229
APPENDIX I: CODEBOOK: RESEARCH STUDY	230

List of Tables

1. SPIDER Framework Criteria for Systematic Review of the Literature.....	175
2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature.....	176
3. Articles Rejected from Systematic Review of the Literature After Further Review in the Coding Stage.....	177
4. Methodological Quality of Studies with a Survey Component for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature.....	179
5. Methodological Qualities of Qualitative Studies for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature	180
6. Participant Demographics for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature	182
7. Keywords for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature.....	183
8. Study Codes and Examples for the Research Study	184
9. Institution: Public vs. Private.....	189
10. Institution: Region	190
11. Institution: Approximate Total Undergraduate Enrollment.....	191
12. Institution: Approximate Undergraduate Student Registration with Disability Resource Center for Academic Accommodations.....	192
13. Institution: Approximate Undergraduate Autistic Student Registration with Disability Resource Center for Academic Accommodations.....	193
14. Autism Support Program: Program Staff.....	194
15. Autism Support Program: Student Participation.....	195

16. Autism Support Program: Length of Time in Existence	196
17. Autism Support Program: Supports for Additional Diagnoses.....	197
18. Autism Support Program: Additional Diagnoses Supported.....	198
19. Autism Support Program Enrollment: Race/Ethnicity	199
20. Autism Support Program Enrollment: Gender	200
21. Autism Support Program Enrollment: Age Range	201
22. Autism Support Program Enrollment: College Classification.....	202
23. Autism Support Program Admissions Requirements	203
24. Providers of Supports and Services	204
25. Autism Support Program: Tiered Supports Provided	206
26. Autism Support Program: Tiered Support Model.....	207
27. Interview Participants: Autism Support Program Offerings.....	208
28. Autism Support Program: Funding Sources	209
29. Autism Support Program: Program Fee per Semester.....	210
30. Autism Support Program: Program Fee Scholarships	211
31. Autism Support Program: Collaboration with Department of Rehabilitative Services	212
32. Autism Support Program: Department of Rehabilitative Services Financial Support Levels	213
33. Autism Support Program: Program Metrics	214

List of Figures

1. PRISMA Diagram of the Search and Screening Process for Articles Included in the
Systematic Review of the Literature..... 215

Abstract

As increasing numbers of autistic students pursue four-year college degrees in the United States, many institutions have responded by developing autism support programs (ASPs). However, there remains limited research exploring what these programs offer, how decisions about services are made, and how administrators evaluate the impact of their work. Using a combination of survey data ($n = 52$) and follow-up interviews ($n = 6$) with ASP administrators, this study examined the types of supports being provided, the factors influencing programmatic decision-making, and administrators' perceptions of which practices are most and least beneficial for their students. The results showed that while academic and social supports are widely prioritized, other essential areas, such as mental health, independent living, and career development, receive less consistent attention. Additionally, most decision-making processes were informed by staff collaboration, student feedback, and professional networks, though many programs continue to face barriers related to funding, staffing, and institutional backing. This study contributes to the limited body of research on ASPs and offers practical, real-world insights that can inform future research and improve the ways in which colleges and universities support autistic students.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have risen dramatically, from 1 in 150 eight-year-old children in 2000 to 1 in 36 in 2020 (Maenner et al., 2023), contributing to a growing number of autistic individuals pursuing postsecondary education (Dwyer et al., 2023). Unfortunately, historical trends have shown that postsecondary education attrition rates are higher among autistic students than among the general student population (Cage et al., 2020; Cage & Howes, 2020; Cola, 2020; Petcu et al., 2021), with less than 40% of autistic students who enter higher education persisting through graduation, as compared to 59% of the general student body (Chown et al., 2018; Myrvold et al., 2021; Newman & Madaus, 2015; Newman et al., 2011). The considerable break between matriculation rates for these populations highlights the significant need for institutional supports that will improve retention and persistence among autistic students (Cox et al., 2017; Cox et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2016).

Problem Statement

As defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (American Psychological Association [APA], 2013), autism spectrum disorder is characterized by:

Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, including deficits in social reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and skills in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships... [and] requires the presence of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (p. 31).

Cognitive deficits are not included in the diagnostic criteria for ASD (APA, 2013), and autistic individuals often have many academic strengths, yet they report more thoughts of dropping out compared to their neurotypical peers (Gurbuz et al., 2019). According to Hamilton and Petty (2023), high attrition rates among autistic college students are often attributable to difficulties navigating the college environment from an executive functioning aspect (i.e., working memory, impulse inhibition, and reasoning; Merriam-Webster, n.d.), a reduced sense of belonging and increased feelings of isolation attributable to social deficits related to ASD, and mental/emotional exhaustion from masking, which is when an autistic individual “suppress[es] [their] natural neurodivergent responses and/or learning and imitate[es] ‘neurotypical behaviors’ in an attempt to avoid negative responses from others” (Hamilton & Petty, 2023, p. 2). These barriers have long-term consequences for both students and institutions, as they hinder the academic and social success of autistic students and contribute to lower retention and graduation rates (Cage et al., 2020; Cage & Howes, 2020; Cola, 2020; Gothberg et al., 2015; Petcu et al., 2021).

Although these obstacles are well-documented (e.g., Dweck, 2006; Gothberg et al., 2015; Kaufman et al., 2019; Shogren et al., 2020; Strait et al., 2020), there is little research investigating the specific needs of autistic students attending four-year institutions in the United States. Addressing the knowledge gap between what autistic college students need and the obstacles they face is essential for equipping postsecondary institutions with the tools needed to develop research-driven practices that foster persistence and success within this growing population.

Significance of Study

Recognizing the disparity between autistic college students' abilities and persistence as a widespread problem, a growing number of postsecondary institutions have introduced autism support programs (ASPs) designed specifically to support autistic individuals in attaining college degrees (Barnhill, 2016; Longtin, 2014; Viesel et al., 2020). These programs often aim to address traditional risk factors associated with successful degree completion for autistic students, such as nonacademic transition skills (otherwise known as 21st-century skills; Gothberg et al., 2015). Twenty-first-century skills are those unrelated to intelligence or the ability to comprehend content, such as growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), sense of identity (Kaufman et al., 2019), self-advocacy (Santhanam & Wilson, 2024), self-determination (Shogren et al., 2020), and executive functioning (Strait et al., 2020). Sense of belonging is also a key contributing factor to successful degree completion (Barnes et al., 2021); if students do not start to feel a sense of belonging within eight weeks of going to college, they are at an especially elevated risk for withdrawing prior to degree completion (Leake & Stodden, 2014).

While the emergence of ASPs on college campuses is promising, little research exists related to ASPs at undergraduate degree-granting institutions in the United States. The lack of comprehensive evaluation and analysis of these programs creates uncertainty about their effectiveness in addressing the unique challenges autistic students face in higher education. It is vital that this be addressed if we are to improve outcomes for autistic college students and provide achievable and tangible guidance for ASP administrators in supporting this student population.

The purpose of this manuscript is to meaningfully contribute to what we currently know about postsecondary ASPs and relate what we learn back to the research regarding the areas of need for autistic students in postsecondary education. Specifically, this study seeks to (a) address

this critical gap in research by investigating the supports currently provided by ASPs in the U.S. and evaluating how these align with the areas of need (e.g., academic, social, self-determination) identified through a literature review examining the needs of autistic students enrolled at four-year degree-granting institutions in the United States, (b) understand how ASP administrators make decisions about which services to offer and what informs those decisions, and (c) identify the practices that ASP administrators perceive as most and least beneficial for the students they serve. Findings from this research will offer research-driven insights for ASP administrators seeking to improve the retention and graduation rates of autistic students. Additionally, this research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of effective practices for fostering neurodiversity in postsecondary education, ultimately advancing equity and inclusion for autistic individuals in higher education and beyond.

Research Questions

Based on the existing literature in these areas, my research questions were as follows:

- (1) What supports are ASPs currently providing for autistic students at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S., and how do these supports correspond with the areas of need for this population identified through a review of the literature?
- (2) How do ASP administrators at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S. decide which services to provide, and what informs their decision-making process?
- (3) What practices do ASP administrators at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S. report to be most and least beneficial for program participants?

To answer these questions, I employed a multi-method research design with a survey and semi-structured interviews. This project is not a true mixed methods study because the data gleaned from each method was analyzed and interpreted separately (Hott et al., 2021). A survey

was chosen to answer the first research question because surveys are an expedient way to collect information from a large population in a relatively short period of time (Hott et al., 2021). Given the exploratory nature of research questions two and three, a qualitative approach was most appropriate in providing an opportunity to gain in-depth insights into administrators' decision-making processes and perceptions of program effectiveness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hott et al., 2021).

The survey collected data relevant to the first question and informed the first question of the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were designed to supplement the survey data for the first research question and to fully answer research questions two and three. This study was conducted through the lens of Critical Autism Studies (CAS; Davidson & Orsini, 2013; Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2022; O'Dell et al., 2016; Woods et al., 2018). Using CAS as a theoretical framework for this project informed the ways in which I interviewed my participants, allowing me to focus on the ability and intersectionality of the students served by ASPs. The CAS framework also informed the analysis of the interview data when I was creating and interpreting the codebook.

Hypotheses

For Research Question 1 (RQ1), I hypothesized that the majority of ASPs would offer social and/or academic supports, but independent living and career development supports would be inconsistently addressed, based on the research regarding areas of need for autistic college students and the minimal literature regarding ASPs (Barnhill, 2016; Shmulsky et al., 2015; Viezel et al., 2020).

I do not have hypotheses regarding RQ2 and RQ3 for two reasons. First, the literature base is insufficient to inform sound hypotheses. Through the literature review process, only four

articles emerged that (a) concerned ASPs at four-year degree-granting institutions in the U.S. and (b) were conducted through the lens of program administrators. One article also included two-year and graduate institutions and was thus excluded from the review (Barnhill, 2016), one was a single-subject case study (Sullivan, 2016), and another was focused solely on one specific program (Shmulsky et al., 2015); only one article explored support offerings across ASPs in the U.S. at four-year degree-granting institutions (Viezel et al., 2020).

The second reason I do not have hypotheses for questions two and three is that these questions are exploratory in nature. Rather than generating a hypothesis that limits the researcher to seeking evidence for a narrowly defined issue, qualitative researchers often prioritize the generation of open-ended research questions that can evolve as new information emerges and insights are formed throughout the data collection process (Lareau, 2012). The nature of research questions two and three necessitated qualitative methods to capture the nuanced decision-making processes of administrators and their perceptions of program effectiveness. These qualitative insights were used to complement the quantitative data derived through the survey, offering a deeper understanding of how ASPs operate and align with the needs of autistic students.

Conclusion

Despite the growing number of autistic students matriculating to postsecondary education (Dwyer et al., 2023), research on these students' unique needs and the ASPs designed to meet them remains woefully inadequate, particularly within the context of four-year institutions. This lack of research leaves administrators at four-year institutions without the research-driven guidance necessary to effectively support autistic students, thus creating a significant divide between these students' specific needs and the services provided to meet them.

This study addresses this critical research gap by offering actionable insights that ASP administrators can use to enhance the effectiveness of their programs. By identifying best practices and aligning program offerings with the needs of autistic students, this research equips administrators with research-driven strategies to improve student retention, foster inclusion, and achieve institutional success. In practical terms, the insights derived from this study may empower administrators to refine their ASPs to address the needs of autistic students. These improvements not only benefit students but also advance institutional goals related to diversity, retention, and student success.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

There is a limited research base regarding the needs of autistic postsecondary students and an even sparser literature base regarding postsecondary programs designed specifically to meet the needs of autistic students for the purpose of increasing retention and graduation rates among this population. Therefore, the purpose of this systematic literature review was to discover the needs of autistic students enrolled in four-year degree-granting institutions in the United States and explore how/if autism support programs (ASPs) are meeting those needs. As such, the research questions for this systematic literature review were as follows:

- (1) What are the areas of need to support undergraduate autistic college students across their degree programs?
- (2) What areas of need should be addressed within an undergraduate college-level ASP?
- (3) What areas of need are being addressed within undergraduate college-level ASPs?

Method

This systematic review was conducted using the SPIDER framework: Sample, Phenomena of Interest, Design, Evaluation, and Research type (Cooke et al., 2012; [Table 1](#)). A search of the entirety of the EBSCO Collection, which includes a total of 88 databases (see [Appendix A](#)), was performed on February 6, 2024, using the following Boolean string to search in all fields:

("higher education" OR "college" OR "university") AND ("autism" OR "asperger*") AND ("program") AND ("social skills" OR "executive functioning" OR "independent living" OR "transition skills" OR "employment skills").

To minimize extraneous results, I unchecked “Apply equivalent subjects” prior to conducting the search. I limited the search to articles published during or after 2002, as this is the first record I was able to find regarding the establishment of an ASP (West, 2019).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

I chose to include only studies published in English and undertaken in the United States due to cultural differences and legal requirements specific to the United States (i.e., the Americans with Disabilities Act as Amended and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act). Because this is a review of the published literature, search results were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles; pre-prints, opinion pieces, conference papers, dissertations, and other forms of gray literature were excluded from the search.

Additional inclusion criteria were broken down into three main categories: voice/participant, methodology, and focus ([Table 2](#)). Inclusion criteria for voice/participant included autistic students enrolled in an undergraduate degree program at a public or private four-year university in the United States or administrators/directors of ASPs at public or private four-year universities in the United States. Regarding methodology, studies using qualitative and/or survey methods were included as were practice briefs regarding ASPs. Finally, included studies were focused either on undergraduate ASPs or the experiences, perceptions, needs, and outcomes of undergraduate autistic students pertaining to topics such as academics, social, independent living, career development, and self-determination skills.

Studies regarding parents/caregivers, educators, practitioners, peers, postsecondary administrators not directly working in/with an ASP or working with the disability resource center (DRC) supporting students with all other disabilities, students at two-year/community colleges, non-degree seeking students, inclusive postsecondary education programs (IPSE), online

students, graduate students, transition-age students, children (as defined by birth to high school seniors), and individuals not diagnosed with autism were excluded on the basis of voice/participant. Literature reviews and experimental studies aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of a practice, program, or intervention were excluded under methodology. I excluded experimental studies because the scope of this literature review was to explore the needs of autistic college students from their perspective; an exploration of effective interventions to meet those needs is a different project. Finally, articles regarding the transition to college and associated skills/training prior to arrival; early childhood or grade school; a specific curriculum, training, instructional strategy, intervention, or instrument; non-autistic students; and/or educational supports not geared toward autistic students were excluded under the category of focus.

Screening Procedures

The initial search yielded 915 results after exact duplicates were removed. The titles and abstracts of all 915 results were screened for the inclusion criteria; 889 articles were rejected through this process. The remaining 26 articles were screened for the same criteria using the full text of the articles, a practice that yielded 12 studies from this search.

A backward search was performed on the reference lists of each of the included 12 articles and forward searches were conducted using Semantic Scholar, Web of Science, CrossRef, ResearchGate, and/or Google Scholar. The ancestral search yielded 1,978 records (897 backward, 1,081 forward), 567 of which were duplicates. Titles and abstracts were screened for the remaining 1,411 articles, and 163 were subsequently reviewed at the full-text level. The ancestral search yielded 13 articles for a total of 25 articles that initially were thought to meet inclusion criteria.

After completing the initial and ancestral searches, I had a total of 25 articles that were tagged as meeting the inclusion criteria. Before beginning the coding process, however, I performed one more full-text review of each of the 25 articles to confirm that each article fully met the inclusion criteria. Based on this review, 15 articles that initially seemed to fit were excluded for various reasons: 14 were excluded because participant's voice included more than autistic undergraduate students seeking a four-year degree; two were excluded based on their methodology; and three were excluded based on the focus of the study (some were excluded for a combination of reasons; see [Table 3](#)). Following this final review, 10 articles were included as meeting inclusion criteria, five from the initial search and five from the ancestral search. Please see [Figure 1](#) for a PRISMA flow diagram of the search process (Page et al., 2021).

Summary of Included Articles

Nine of the final 10 studies included in this review used qualitative methods. Two of the research teams that used qualitative methods also incorporated a survey into their data collection. The primary qualitative methodology used was semi-structured interviews; however, three studies reviewed extant data, and one author used a case study. The final article was a practice brief.

Articles Regarding the Needs of Autistic Students

Of the studies included in the review, seven focused on identifying the needs of autistic students at four-year institutions in the U.S. Authors Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019) used a survey and semi-structured interviews to explore undergraduate autistic students' perceived pathways/barriers to success and preferred accommodations at four four-year universities. This study was a furtherance of the study by Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff (2019), where the authors also used a survey and semi-structured interviews to investigate undergraduate autistic students'

preferred accommodations and support services at one four-year university. Colclough (2018) used a phenomenological approach to explore social experiences and the role they play in retention and persistence by conducting semi-structured interviews with undergraduate autistic students at four-year universities. Cullen (2015) used a naturalistic inquiry design to explore undergraduate autistic students' perceived social needs and how those needs are met through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups across five different four-year universities. Hadley and Zhang (2021) conducted a phenomenological study investigating the transition experiences of undergraduate autistic students at one four-year university through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In a study determining the ASP supports valued and/or used by undergraduate autistic students at one four-year university, Scheef et al. (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews and reviewed extant data in the form of notes and records from student visits to the institution's ASP. Finally, Schindler et al. (2015) reviewed in-depth log notes from visits to the ASP by undergraduate autistic students at the authors' four-year university.

Articles Regarding Autism Support Programs

The remaining three articles were coded as being focused on ASPs. The first, by Shmulsky et al. (2015), was a practice brief describing an autism-specific transition program for incoming autistic undergraduate students at a single four-year university. Sullivan (2016) utilized a case study method to describe the individualized supports that were effective in their work with one autistic undergraduate student. Lastly, Viesel et al. (2020) found and reviewed the websites of every ASP located at a four-year university in the United States (at the time) to determine what supports were being offered to autistic undergraduate students through these programs.

Data Extraction and Coding

To create the codebook for this review, I drafted codes based on participant/program characteristics, methodology, study quality, study findings, and my research questions (see [Appendix B](#)) and created a spreadsheet. Once all articles meeting the inclusion criteria were identified, I independently hand-coded each article, highlighting data according to the codebook and then transferring it to the spreadsheet. On the spreadsheet, I indicated whether a code was present using a 0 to 1 scale, with 0 being not present and 1 being present. If a code was found to be present, data supporting the code were also transferred to the spreadsheet. After completing this process, I re-read each article to find any additional codes that were not included in the original iteration of the codebook. This third review resulted in an additional seven codes (see [Appendix B](#)). From these data, I was able to determine common themes. Themes were identified using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

For study quality, I followed the recommendations of Protogerou and Hagger (2020) for assessing the quality of the survey components included in the studies conducted by Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019) and Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff (2019), which included quality indicators for the introduction, participants, data, and ethics (see [Table 4](#)). For methodological quality of the qualitative studies included in this review (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Colclough, 2018; Cullen, 2015; Hadley & Zhang, 2021; Scheef et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2015; Sullivan, 2016; Viezel et al., 2020), I used the rubric from Garwood et al. (2023), which was developed from the recommendations of Brantlinger et al. (2005) and Trainor & Graue (2014) and included quality indicators for interview/focus group studies and/or observation studies; theory, transparency, and reflexivity; and data analysis (see [Table 5](#)). Quality was coded using a rating scale of 0 to 2, with 0 being not or barely addressed, 1 being

somewhat addressed but missing key information, and 2 being met. Where a criterion was not applicable for a particular article, that criterion was coded with a dash. The final article included in this review, Shmulsky et al. (2015), was a practice brief and thus not subject to methodological rigor.

Inter-Rater Reliability

A colleague from the Educational Psychology department with experience in systematic literature reviews independently screened 25% (232) of the titles and abstracts identified in the initial search, with a total inter-rater reliability (IRR) of 98.7%. Scored agreement (i.e., both reviewers independently scored an article as meeting the inclusion criteria; Peltier, 2024) across these 232 articles was 60%, and unscored agreement (i.e., both reviewers independently scored an article as not meeting the inclusion criteria; Peltier, 2024) was 99.1%. After further discussion to gain consensus, the same colleague independently screened 25% (7) of the full-text documents yielded in the initial search, resulting in 100% agreement. The same colleague independently reviewed 30% (3) of the final articles for the presence of each code, with a total IRR of 95.4%. Unscored agreement was 85.6%, and scored agreement across these three articles was 93.4%.

Finally, my colleague independently coded 50% (1) of the survey components and 30% (3) of the qualitative studies for methodological quality, with a total IRR of 57.9% and 85.6%, respectively. The initial total agreement for the methodological quality of the survey component was 57.9%, with an unscored agreement of 40%, a scored agreement of 52.9%, and a fully scored agreement (i.e., both parties indicated a criterion was present but may have disagreed on the extent) of 64.3%. The initial total agreement for the methodological quality of the qualitative components was 85.6%, with an unscored agreement of 77.8%, a scored agreement of 82.3%,

and a fully scored agreement of 87.8%. All discrepancies were discussed and resolved for a final agreement of 100% across content and quality coding measures.

Findings

In this section, I will focus on both study methodology and quality, followed by identified themes.

Study Methodology

Recruitment Methods

Most participants were recruited through the institution's disability resource center (DRC) or an existing ASP, but other methods included recruitment through a university-sponsored workshop, the use of faculty mentors, partnerships with external autism-focused organizations, campus advertising, and snowball sampling. Each of the three articles concerning existing ASPs was uniquely focused and thus used different recruitment methods for participation. Shmulsky et al. (2015) wrote a practice brief on the ASP with which they were affiliated, so there was no recruitment of programs necessary. Sullivan (2016) reported on a case study about their work supporting one individual student. The student was called in to speak with the author after receiving a faculty complaint about the student's behavior in their classroom. After visiting with the student, the author agreed to take on the student as a mentee and used this experience to make recommendations based on their observations and interactions with the student. Viezel et al. (2020) performed Google searches to find ASPs in the United States. They searched the same keywords for each individual state (i.e., autism/ASD/Asperger's, etc. AND Alabama/Alaska/Arizona, etc.), choosing programs that were listed on one of the first four search pages and that had a link to an official institutional website. They had Research Assistants perform the same searches on different devices and cross-checked the final results with two

reputable online databases for ASPs, College Autism Network and College Autism Spectrum. They then gathered standard information from each program's website and performed a content analysis to find common themes among programs.

Participants

Unsurprisingly, participants in all the studies conducted from the point of view of the students were autistic college students. Of these seven studies, five required a documented diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder, one allowed for self-identification only, and the other did not clearly state whether a formal diagnosis was required or if self-identification would suffice. There was a total of 122 individual autistic students who participated in the eight studies conducted through their voice; 60 of those students completed surveys, while 73 participated through qualitative methods (11 students completed both the survey and an interview).

Participant demographics were not reported consistently across studies, but in general, when reported, students were predominately White, male, and first or second-year students (see [Table 6](#) for full participant demographics). Fifteen students attended community college prior to enrolling in their undergraduate program. While the highest percentage of participants were enrolled in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) programs at 28%, there were also several students enrolled in non-STEM programs. The second highest percentage of participants were enrolled in Humanities programs (14%), followed by Arts & Sciences and Journalism (10%, respectively), Fine Arts (9%), Business and Social Sciences (8%, respectively), Education (5%), and other programs (4%); 6% of participants were undecided.

The articles focused on ASPs ranged from a description of one program with 25-30 students (Shmulsky et al., 2015) to a case study with one student (Sullivan, 2016) to a review of 50 existing programs' websites (Viezel et al., 2020). The program discussed by Shmulsky et al.

(2015) was housed under Student Affairs at a small, private liberal arts college specifically for students with “learning differences” (Landmark College). The program serves first and second-year students and 85% identify as male. The article did not include information regarding race/ethnicity, age, and degree programs. Sullivan (2016) worked with an autistic student beginning in their sophomore year who had co-occurring diagnoses of learning disabilities and anxiety. Viezel et al. (2020) found that most ASPs were housed within the counseling/psychological services office and DRCs. Other parent departments included the College of Education, speech/language, and psychology. The programs they reviewed predominately required a separate application, proof of admission to the institution, and an autism spectrum diagnosis. Programs frequently required a psychological/neuropsychological evaluation, interview, high school transcript, and IEP/504 documents, and they rarely required a letter of recommendation, registration with the DRC, a writing sample, a parent application, an application fee, a picture, an age cutoff, or an IQ cutoff. Most programs (72.7%) exclusively served autistic students, but about a third of the programs also served students with other diagnoses. A majority of the programs were fee-for-service with an average cost of \$3,535 per semester; the program with the highest cost was \$9,550 per semester. At the time of publication, 28 states had at least one ASP (Viezel et al.)

Study Characteristics

The studies in this review were qualitative in nature, with the exception of Shmulsky et al., 2015, which was a practice brief describing an ASP. While primarily qualitative, the two studies led by Dr. Amy L. Accardo (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019), supplemented the qualitative data with data gleaned from an iterative survey that was used in both studies with minor modifications. The qualitative methods that were used were

primarily semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups, though two studies reviewed permanent products to draw conclusions (Schindler et al., 2015; Viezel et al., 2020). Of the five that reported it, all but one study indicated that the researcher conducted the interviews/focus groups; the one that did not use the researcher (Scheef et al., 2019) used someone who had no prior relationship or contact with the interviewee because the students were recruited from the recruiter's existing program, and they wanted to avoid the potential conflict of interest.

Though the parameters for my search ranged from 2002 to 2024, all studies fell within the much smaller range of 2015 to 2021. Most articles were published in 2015 and 2019, with 27% each, followed by 2018, with 18% of the published articles, and finally, 2016, 2020, and 2021, each publishing 9% of the sample. No articles from 2017 met the inclusion criteria. Study locations were spread across the United States and ranged from top to bottom and coast to coast. Only three of the 11 articles included information regarding researcher funding. Two of those articles explicitly stated that no funding was received (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019), while the other article (Colclough, 2018) explicitly stated that they did receive funding for their research from the Organization for Autism Research.

The most common keywords used were "autism" and "college," with eight studies using one or both terms or some derivative thereof. Other common keywords were "accommodations," "education," "postsecondary education," and "transition(ing)," with three studies using each of them, respectively, while "Asperger's" and "university" were used by two individual studies, respectively. Other keywords that were used by only one study each were "disability supports," "first-year college students," "learning disabilities," and "mental health" (see [Table 7](#)).

Study Quality

For nine out of the 10 included articles, study quality was rated on a scale of 0-2, where 0 = *not/barely addressed*, 1 = *somewhat, but missing key information*, and 2 = *met/yes*. As a practice brief, the article by Shmulsky et al. (2015) has no methodological qualities to evaluate.

Survey Components

The two articles that utilized a survey in conjunction with qualitative interviews (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019) were evaluated using the design criteria for survey research laid out by Protogerou and Hagger (2020; see [Table 4](#) for detailed scoring for each article against the rubric). The overall mean quality score was 1.22 and the mean quality scores for the individual articles were 1.42 and 1.02, respectively. Neither study met the criteria for *information about the person collecting the data or the duration of data collection*. Seven criteria were met in full by both studies: (a) *the problem or phenomenon under investigation was defined, described, and justified*; (b) *the population under investigation was defined, described, and justified*; (c) *specific research questions/hypotheses were stated*; (d) *information was provided about the context (e.g., place) of data collection*; (e) *the study sample was described in terms of key demographic characteristics*; (f) *discussion of findings was confined to the population from which the sample was drawn*; and (g) *funding sources or conflicts of interest were disclosed*. Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019) had mean scores of 1.5 for introduction criteria, 1.67 for participant criteria, 1.22 for data criteria, and 1.3 for ethics criteria. Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff (2019) had mean scores of 1.75 for introduction criteria, .67 for participant criteria, 1.0 for data criteria, and .67 for ethics criteria.

Qualitative Methods

Methodological quality of the qualitative studies included in this review (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Colclough, 2018; Cullen, 2015; Hadley &

Zhang, 2021; Scheef et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2015; Sullivan, 2016; Viezel et al., 2020) were evaluated using the design criteria for qualitative research laid out by Garwood et al. (2023), which was developed from the recommendations of Brantlinger et al. (2005) and Trainor and Graue (2014; see [Table 5](#) for detailed scoring for each article against the rubric). The overall mean quality score over all six articles was 1.49. The mean quality scores for the individual articles were 1.42, 1.37, 1.7, 1.39, 1.33, 1.53, 1.5, and 1.41, respectively. The category with the lowest adherence was *Theory, Transparency, and Reflexivity*, with a mean quality score of .83 for this section. Average scores on these measures ranged from .3 (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019) to 1.3 (Colclough, 2018). Only two articles (Scheef et al., 2019; Sullivan, 2016) at least somewhat provided information regarding *positionality and biases that were acknowledged and connected to methods*, though neither fully met the criterion. Hadley and Zhang (2021) somewhat *explained the role of theory*, but only Colclough (2018) fully met that criterion. The most consistently met criterion within this section was *methodological/interpretive choices were explained with a credible narrative*; with only the exception of Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff, (2019), every article fully met this criterion.

Overall, the criteria relating to data analysis were consistently met by the studies, though only five of the eight fully met every criterion within this section (e.g., Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Cullen, 2015; Scheef et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2015). While each researcher/research team included in this review may have used *sound measures to ensure confidentiality*, most did not include explicit information regarding such. Four studies (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Scheef et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2015; Sullivan, 2016) alluded to measures that were taken to ensure the confidentiality of participants,

but only two studies explicitly shared sufficient information to fully meet this criterion (Colclough, 2018; Cullen, 2015).

Themes

The articles included in this review are very similar in some ways but vastly different in others. Despite their differences, however, they capture parallel themes when it comes to the needs of autistic college students, whether from the students' points of view or autism support providers'. Across both domains, two primary themes, designated as such because they were discussed in four or more of the included studies, emerged: academic needs/supports, which included subthemes of academic coaching, tutoring, and faculty mentors; and social needs/supports, which included subthemes of developing a social network, navigating group work, and social skills groups/training. The themes that were discussed in at least three of the included studies were identified as secondary themes and included self-determination skills/needs and external support needs (i.e., disability services and accommodations). Mental health and comorbid diagnoses, sensory sensitivity, parental involvement and support, a dedicated program space, balancing personal and academic lives, independent living, and career development were discussed in only one or two articles but were still explored in sufficient depth to be relevant; as such they were identified as tertiary themes and are discussed as well. Prior to discussing thematic findings, I will describe the (a) recruitment methods, (b) participants, (c) study characteristics, and (d) study quality, differentiated by survey and qualitative methodologies. Themes specific to ASPs are included separately in the last section.

Academic Needs and Supports

One of the themes that emerged in the majority of the included studies was that of autistic students' identified academic needs and supports. This theme yielded three sub-themes:

academic coaching, tutoring, and faculty mentors. Data prescribed to this theme were predominantly concerned with academic outcomes.

Academic Coaching. Across multiple studies, students expressed a need for academic coaching (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Scheef et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2015; Sullivan, 2016; Viesel et al., 2020). For example, one student stated,

I like the academic coaching because it helps me figure out how to set goals and keep them... I found that when plans change or when my desires change I am still met with 'you know, hey here's a way to meet that goal' or 'word of advice, that might not be a good idea, and here is why,' in light of this new information I am still here to support you if that doesn't bother you. Or even if it does and you still want to go through with it. Support that isn't contingent on somebody's agenda for me. Somebody understanding an acceptance for what I want as, you know, what I should be going for, because generally I know what is best for me. (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019, p. 579)

Others expressed that academic sessions involving support from staff were extremely valuable, particularly those geared toward executive functioning skills like time management, organization, and accountability (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Scheef et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2015). Executive functioning was a primary focus of academic coaching, according to Schindler et al. (2015). All but one of their participants repetitively referred to difficulties paying attention, remembering things, and staying focused, which often led to missed homework assignments. Their participants also had limited ability regarding overt (i.e., testing different methods/trial and error) and covert (i.e., mentally reframing problems or considering alternative approaches) methods; in other words, participants tended to stick with their initial approach to problem-solving, even when it wasn't effective. They also lacked cognitive

flexibility regarding problem-solving. For example, one participant's primary goal was to develop study skills because they did not know how to study without being given a study guide (Schindler et al., 2015).

Tutoring. Tutoring regularly came up as a need and necessary tool for success, especially when it came to writing; the most common direct academic support discussed was assistance from the institution's writing center (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Hadley & Zhang, 2021; Schindler et al., 2015). In fact, according to Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019), the availability of a tutoring center was a deciding factor for some students as to where they would apply for college. Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff (2019) found that 65% of their participants ranked tutoring among their most preferred academic support with 57% specifically naming the writing center. Despite writing being one of the most challenging academic skills for some participants (Hadley & Zhang, 2021; Schindler et al., 2015), there are still drawbacks to using tutoring centers such as the writing center, namely that there is little privacy in an open tutoring center and tutors are not necessarily consistent, which requires students to reexplain their challenges and needs to a new person each time they go in (Hadley & Zhang, 2021). Students desired individual help in a discrete location with the same tutor(s) each time and often looked to student tutors as peer mentors (Hadley & Zhang, 2021).

Faculty Mentors. Another prominent subtheme of academic needs was the desire for faculty mentors. Students viewed mentoring relationships with faculty as significantly contributing to academic persistence, growth, and success (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Colclough, 2018). They valued the insight of an authoritative figure with extensive academic experience who was established at the university, particularly as they were beginning their college careers (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff,

2019). For example, one student stated, “I wish that I could have had a faculty mentor. I would have loved to have had that transition with a faculty member who’s already been established at the university... that would have been helpful, but maybe next year” (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019, p. 4887), while another expressed their preference for learning from “those who have academic experience beyond the 1–4 years [other] students have (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019, p. 580). Students with strong ties to faculty often felt more connected to the institution and attributed their academic success to these mentors (Colclough, 2018; Hadley & Zhang, 2021). Students without established faculty relationships did not feel safe contacting their professors for additional support or asking clarifying questions (Hadley & Zhang, 2021; Scheef et al., 2019).

Social Needs and Supports

The other theme that emerged across the majority of included studies was the need for support related to social difficulties. Data prescribed to this theme were predominantly concerned with social and/or interpersonal outcomes. Sub-themes across this category were developing a social network, navigating group work, and a lack of interest in social skills groups/training. Attitudes toward social needs and activities were very inconsistent across articles, with some students being very averse to improving their social skills or attending a social event and others viewing social connection as a point of success.

Developing a Social Network. Developing a social network was important to many students across most articles. For some students, the goal was to make connections with peers (Accardo, Bean et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Cullen, 2015; Scheef et al., 2019), while other students sought connections with faculty and staff (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Colclough, 2018) or maintained relationships with their family to fulfill their social needs (Cullen, 2015). Common barriers to building a social

network were finding a safe and appropriate place to meet new friends (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Colclough, 2018; Cullen, 2015), overcoming the fear of rejection inherently present when making new friends (Cullen, 2015; Schindler et al., 2015), and finding people who may share similar interests and are understanding of the quirks and uniqueness of autistic individuals (Cullen, 2015; Scheef et al., 2019). Recommendations for meeting new people were to join a club (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Cullen, 2015), talk to classmates (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Colclough, 2018; Cullen, 2015), attend campus events (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Colclough, 2018; Cullen, 2015), and seek out individuals with similar interests using social media (Cullen, 2015).

Though many participants indicated the desire to meet new people as part of their social needs, not all students felt a need to meet new people and were very happy with their small circle of friends (Colclough, 2018; Cullen, 2015). Some students actively avoided campus events or approached them warily because of unrelated issues associated with their autism, disinterest, or a higher priority placed on academics, while others were rebelling against what they viewed as society's expectations of how a college student should be socially (Colclough, 2018).

Navigating Group Work. Discussed primarily in only one article and merely touched on in another, *navigating group work* was still a prominent theme within the study conducted by Cullen (2015) and warrants being included because struggles with interpersonal communication are a diagnostic criterion for autism spectrum disorders (APA, 2013), and group work necessitates effective interpersonal communication. The participants in Cullen's (2015) study articulated the impact of this connection with reports of their own struggles in the classroom. The consensus was that the unique scenario of being forced to work with other individuals that you may or may not know in a situation that will directly impact your grade serves to heighten social

communication difficulties, leaving the autistic student open to negative outcomes such as bullying, social isolation, and dismissal of their concerns by their professor (Cullen, 2015; Schindler et al., 2015). One student shared consistent difficulties with navigating group work in their courses:

In class, every time I am placed into a group, slowly everyone starts to act distant and angry with me, leaving me to become the scapegoat and take the blame for anything that goes wrong, despite being a straight-A student. When I contact instructors about my concerns, I am often told to talk it out with my group, which goes nowhere. (Cullen, 2015, p. 95)

Successfully navigating the classroom, group work in particular, requires being comfortable and adept at using multiple social skills simultaneously, which may be challenging to autistic individuals (Cullen, 2015; Schindler et al., 2015). Participants expressed difficulty with engaging with group members, the level of cooperation required in group work, and the distribution of assignments (Cullen, 2015).

Social Skills Groups/Training. Somewhat surprisingly, social skills groups/trainings were not an oft-used support, and some students even actively disliked them (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019). Only 23% of students in one study and 26% in another (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019 and Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019, respectively) endorsed a preference for participating in social skills groups, while 35% of students in another study cited social skills groups as a resource they had no interest in using; one student in this study even explicitly stated that they have no intention of using such a group (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019), stating:

Oh yeah, I didn't find the social skills group useful because I felt it was just kind of... cheesy. I felt it didn't tackle the areas in which I felt I struggled with. I felt I struggled with

more... like, being able to rely on myself to get things done. It's more intrapersonal skills. I'm not to say it can't be useful for some people, but it wasn't as useful for me. It was a little bit useful, but... it was kind of, comparatively, not the best use of my time, and it was... you know what I mean. I found, you know, better service in the support I got from teachers and my academic coach, with things or problems, and my therapist [university-provided counselor]. (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019, p. 580)

Having a safe space to go where people are aware and understand autism was more effective at developing social skills in autistic students according to the findings of Scheef et al. (2019).

Secondary Themes

Self-Determination Skills and Needs

Self-determination skills/needs were a noteworthy standard of success (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Scheef et al., 2019) and a substantial area of struggle (Schindler et al., 2015) for autistic students. Though not as frequent as social or academic needs, in their review of visit logs from one ASP, Scheef and colleagues (2019) found that 7% of visits with program staff were focused on advocacy. Students expressed a need for guidance with recognizing when and knowing how to ask for help (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Scheef et al., 2019) and shared that being able to do this consistently was an indicator of success as a college student (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019). One student shared that they had received practical and valuable information from program staff with "recognizing when to ask for help, if things aren't going well, being able to reach out to my professors and kind of work through issues" (Scheef et al., 2019, p. 223). Another student expressed that "You have to have a lot of faith in yourself, uh a lot of self-determination. You really have to do some introspective work, to be successful... but I think you can be your own advocate at times too" (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019, p. 4883). Self-advocacy

was found to be especially important when requesting accommodations from the institution's DRC and letting instructors know that they are approved and necessary (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019).

Goal setting and attainment were other areas of self-determination that served as an indicator of student success (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019). Schindler et al. (2015) found evidence to support this within their sample: participants with high levels of self-efficacy were more successful with their studies, developing friendships, and attaining goals. They also found that students who had developed an intrinsic reward system reported higher levels of self-efficacy and progress toward goals.

Self-awareness was frequently referenced in the three studies that discussed self-determination needs among autistic college students (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Scheef et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2015). One student shared their interpretation of success in terms of self-determination skills:

Success as a college student is trying new things, making new friends, and, most important, learning about yourself and what works for you. These things lead to success since they have all made me be helped and go further than I imagined. (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019, p. 4883)

Schindler et al. (2015) found that some students struggled with awareness of personal strengths and limitations, which led to their inability to identify and overcome challenges and manifest goals. At times, this lack of self-awareness influenced students' willingness to register with the campus DRC and request accommodations (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019).

Lastly, students recognized the symbiotic relationship between self-determination and executive functioning (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2015). For some students,

success in these areas meant developing productive behaviors through routines and structure (Schindler et al., 2015). For others, success in these areas meant staying organized, having good time management skills, and being flexible when necessary (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019).

Academic Accommodations

The majority of students preferred the same accommodations: extra time on exams and assignments, copies of instructor notes, and priority registration, with the most popular accommodation being extended time on exams (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Hadley & Zhang, 2021; Scheef et al., 2019). Per Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff (2019), housing accommodations (i.e., single room, quiet floor, etc.) were also found to be useful. Though seemingly a fairly common accommodation, the provision of taking exams at the DRC had mixed results among students, with some finding it extremely valuable (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Scheef et al., 2019) and others finding it inconvenient and non-equitable because of the inability to ask the instructor clarifying questions during the exam and the time it takes for instructors to receive exams for grading (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019). A reader/scribe for exams and audio recording lectures were largely found to be unhelpful for students (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019), though some did find audio recording to be extremely beneficial (Scheef et al., 2019). The consensus regarding the alternative to audio recordings of lectures, i.e., a note-taker, was almost universally disappointing across studies where that specific accommodation came up; students were expecting a professional note-taker but instead were given a volunteer note-taker (if they were given one at all) or were forced to find their own volunteer note-taker (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Hadley & Zhang, 2021). While some students were unhappy with the services offered by their institution's DRC (Hadley & Zhang, 2021), most students seemed generally

satisfied (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Scheef et al., 2019). Suggestions for additional accommodations included access to faculty office hours at the time of enrollment so students can meet with faculty and get a feel for whether or not they were a good fit before enrolling in a class and pre-designated note-takers in each class (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019).

Tertiary Themes

Additional themes that were discussed in only one or two of the included articles included mental health/comorbid diagnoses, sensory issues, parental involvement/support, dedicated program space, and balancing personal and academic lives. Independent living and career development, each a prominent theme in transition research, also emerged in only one or two articles. However, it is worthwhile to include them given the depth in which they were discussed and, as in the case of independent living and career development, their relevance within the literature (Gurbuz et al., 2019; Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Landmark & Zhang, 2012; Mazzotti et al., 2013; Test et al., 2009; Wischnewsky, 2023).

Mental Health/Comorbid Diagnoses

Mental health and other comorbid diagnoses were primarily discussed in the two Accardo et al. articles (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019), but they were salient themes within these two studies. One-third of survey respondents in the Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019) study and nearly half of survey and interview respondents alike in the Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff (2019) study endorsed counseling as a preferred support service in college. Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019) reported that students indicated that the combination of their autism, mental health concerns, and comorbid diagnoses frequently and negatively impacted their

academic and social performance. One student described their experience with autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and bipolar disorder:

I was diagnosed with OCD, and I don't know if you have any experience with OCD, but it is a very crippling disease, and it takes a lot to handle. So, the obstacles I faced were... I didn't really like the idea of sharing a room with somebody, just because of my obsession with having to be clean with everything. Then also things lead to other things too, even throughout my life where I have made success, and I have overcome obstacles, there is always a time when...the depression and things, a lot of time, mostly speaking, I can't really think of myself as confident. I know I have the abilities that I have, but for some reason, when I look at others and I just think of myself, a lot of times, it's confidence. That was a big obstacle too. My mental health has always been very poor. I have bipolar, so I remember the fall semester last year. I was very depressed, and it took a long time to get over that phase, and then I sort of jumbled up, and I'm more stable now, but definitely, mental illness was an obstacle. (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019, p. 4884)

Other students specifically referenced "minor obstacles, like anxiety, some missed deadlines and... taking time to fully understand processes," "autism, depression, being socially inept, angst, boredom, misanthropy," "my fears and insecurities, lack of self-esteem, feeling completely worthless," and "keeping up with pressure/tasks that being a college student brings to the table" (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019, p. 4884). Mental health diagnoses that were specifically mentioned included anxiety, depression, and OCD (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019).

Sensory Concerns

Many students expressed difficulty in social and classroom settings due to overstimulation. For some, sensory concerns dictated whether or not they would enroll in a

specific class or attend an event (Colclough, 2018; Schindler, 2015). One student explained their thought process when weighing the potential for overstimulation with their interest in attending an event, which consisted of the following: “Is there going to be a lot of noise? Okay. Am I able to manage it? If not, don’t go” (Colclough, 2018, p. 7). Other students discussed overstimulation in the residence halls from general noise, social activity, and the plethora of distractions like technology and social media (Schindler et al., 2015).

Parental Involvement and Supports

Parental involvement was discussed in two studies but was presented at opposite ends of the scale. Cullen (2015) found that many of their participants had their social needs met through family interactions. Though slightly more prevalent for the students who still resided in the family home and commuted to school, this was still common for students living independently or on campus as well. The following quotes from two different students encapsulate this: “I was so lonely in college I would drive home to be with family a lot on weekends” and “I come home to visit my parents every other weekend; they live 90 min away. They don’t share my interests, but it’s nice to have people talk to me” (Cullen, 2015, p. 96-97).

On the other side, Schindler et al. (2015) found that parental involvement was a good thing at times, but often parents were overbearing and unable to allow their student to make their own decisions or complete their own work, which led to negative outcomes with self-determination and social skills. Additionally, students who were participating in their program and were doing so at their parents’ behest made less progress, achieved fewer goals, and had fewer positive outcomes than their peers who were there voluntarily (Schindler et al., 2015).

Dedicated Program Space

In one study, students discussed the use of a dedicated program space as a very valuable resource (Scheef et al., 2019). The consensus was that this space provided a safe location for students to sit quietly and do homework or study for exams. One student summed up this sentiment by saying, “The space has been really great, having somewhere where it’s quiet, there’s no social expectations, really, that are overwhelming” (Scheef et al., 2019, p. 223).

Balancing Personal and Academic Lives

Students in one study were concerned with balancing their personal and academic lives and viewed achieving such balance as a form of success (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019). One student encapsulated this when they stated, “I define success as a college student as balancing your personal and academic life to maximize the outcome you want to have once you graduate” (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019, p. 4883).

Independent Living

The development of independent living skills is a common domain in transition literature (Landmark & Zhang, 2012; Mazzotti et al., 2013; Test et al., 2009); however, only one article that met the inclusion criteria explored needs related to this topic (Cullen, 2015). Their findings indicated that although living arrangements for their participants were heterogeneous with some students commuting from the family home, some living on campus, and some living independently off campus, a common theme among these students was that living independently was a challenge regardless of where they lived. The author found that there was a strong need for support in daily living skills among their participants in areas such as appropriate prioritization; knowing when, where, and what to eat; how to navigate transportation; and maintaining proper hygiene (Cullen, 2015).

Career Development

Career development, another common domain within the transition literature (Landmark & Zhang, 2012; Mazzotti et al., 2013; Test et al., 2009), was also addressed by only one study (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019). This topic was addressed within the subthemes of *achieving balance* and *achieving goals*, both under the broader theme of *Success* and can be summed up by two quotes from study participants: “Graduating while also securing employment [is a marker of success] – it’s why I’m in college to begin with” and “Going on to pursue a career in that field, that’s my idea of a success. Doing something that you love and continuing it as you go forward” (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019, p. 4883).

Autism Support Programs

Three articles focused specifically on ASPs: Shmulsky et al. (2015), Sullivan (2016), and Viesel et al. (2020). All used different methods and reported on different elements of ASPs, so themes are presented separately by article.

Shmulsky et al. (2015)

In this article, the authors shared and expanded upon six practices that worked for their program through the first two years of its existence:

- (1) Contact students and their parents before the beginning of the academic year, (2) acclimate small groups of students to campus early, (3) build alliances with parents, (4) select trained advisors, (5) predict and meet residential needs, [and] (6) provide ongoing support during the first year (p. 237)

These six practices have worked for this particular program and were offered as suggestions for other programs that support autistic and other at-risk students.

The authors strongly recommended early connections with incoming students and their parents, beginning prior to the start of the first semester. By starting this process before students

arrive on campus for classes, students can be connected with resources such as the counseling center to find and establish a relationship with a provider, the student health center to establish care, and the DRC for housing accommodations. The authors posited that housing needs for autistic students are unique and sometimes complicated and, thus, should be handled on a case-by-case basis. Rather than attending an orientation with a large group that may be overwhelming for autistic students and their parents, support programs can conduct separate orientations for smaller groups consisting of only participants and their parents. The addition of hiring existing program participants who have had success in the program to be orientation leaders has the added benefits of introducing incoming participants to potential future mentors and showing parents real-life examples of program outcomes. The authors recognized and leaned into the enhanced involvement of parents with their autistic children and encouraged strong and consistent communication with parents beginning once the student has been accepted into the program. Involving parents in the process can give program administrators important background information on students and ease some of their anxiety as their children enter this new phase of their lives. They further recommended having a parents-only orientation session to answer questions, set expectations for the program, and highlight potential pitfalls for their students in their first year of college.

Another recommendation was to be selective when assigning students to an academic advisor and make sure that the person is trained and has experience with working with autistic students and/or has a background in special education, general education, other disabilities, or related fields. Having a dedicated person in advising who understands autism and the potential barriers autistic students will face can help to identify indicators of potential challenges and prevent them from turning into problems as well as be able to assist autistic students with

developing self-advocacy skills. Similarly, someone within the housing department who can assist autistic students with appropriate room assignments is necessary to facilitate the most positive outcomes.

Finally, the authors recommended that support extend beyond orientation and continue through the first year and beyond. Suggestions for continued support included mentoring from older students who are familiar with the needs of autistic students, regularly scheduled seminars or sessions related to topics of interest and need for the students in the program, self-guided social skills apps and/or programs, and providing program participants with a list of autism-friendly instructors who engage in inclusive teaching methods, such as Universal Design for Learning.

Sullivan (2016)

Dr. Sullivan's findings echoed three of Shmulsky et al.'s (2015) recommendations, namely building alliances with parents, selecting trained advisors, and finding autism-friendly instructors. Regarding the importance of a trained advisor, Sullivan stated, "For students with [ASD], it's critical to identify a patient and dedicated academic advisor, one who is knowledgeable about institutional requirements and also his/her fellow faculty" (p. 15). After having found such an advisor for her student, she asked him for his thoughts on what makes a good advisor for autistic students. The advisor responded with:

"I'd say the most important thing is a willingness to be patient, recognizing that [autistic] students may require extra attention, and different strategies may need to be employed in presenting information either about classes as an advisor, or in classes as an instructor... Perhaps most important is that faculty understand and fully accept that [autistic] students have every right to be in their class, and they cannot opt out of working with these students.

At the same time, faculty can't be 'afraid' of [autistic] students and need to communicate both academic and behavioral expectations for their classes so that everyone is on the same page. (p.16)

Sullivan also discussed the importance of enrolling in classes taught by instructors who are known for "being empathetic toward students with disabilities and invisible diagnoses" (p. 15). When it was necessary for her student to enroll in a course with an unknown faculty member, it was not uncommon for the student to have a negative experience where she did not receive her approved accommodations until it was too late to salvage her grade, and the student had to drop the course.

Collaboration with the student's parents was a key factor in fully supporting the student. Recognizing that the student would go to her parents for a different answer if she did not like what Dr. Sullivan had told her, Dr. Sullivan made it her mission to ensure that she and the student's parents were on the same page and presented a united front. This meant that she would have to remind the parents at times that she was the expert, she also had the student's best interests at heart, and they had to trust her if she was to be effective in supporting their daughter.

Lastly, Dr. Sullivan utilized a team approach when supporting the student, where she served as the team leader and was consistently in communication with the student's parents, advisor, therapist, and tutor to ensure cohesiveness in the supports being provided. Had the student lived on campus, the student's Resident Advisor would also have been on the support team. Recommendations from Dr. Sullivan for additional facets of support included interpersonal coaching and social skills enhancement, executive function coaching, and life coaching.

Viezel et al. (2020)

Supporting the findings from the studies in this review conducted from the student's point of view, Viezel and colleagues found that the most frequently cited supports listed on programs' websites were related to academic and social needs. The most common academic support found among ASPs was academic coaching at 51% of programs. Though to a much lesser percentage, programs also offered proctored study halls, tutoring, special courses, and individual (1:1) in-class support. From one-third to one-half of the programs offered social supports, including peer mentoring, mentor check-ins, social skills interventions, and social events. Almost half of the programs offered employment supports, and one-third of the programs offered individual and/or group counseling. Supports explicitly offered by less than 20% of programs include independent living supports, life coaching, on-call support, speech/language skills, and physical fitness. At least one-third to one-half of the programs failed to list program-specific supports on their website, leaving the actual percentage of ASPs that offer these supports unidentifiable. The results of Viezel and colleagues' review of existing ASPs' websites mirror the themes from the other articles included in this review.

Discussion

ASPs are becoming more prevalent across four-year institutions in the United States, but there is minimal research informing the specific needs of autistic college students, which should be addressed. The purpose of this review was to determine the needs of autistic students enrolled in four-year postsecondary undergraduate programs in the United States and explore how existing programs are meeting those needs. This review included seven studies regarding the needs of autistic undergraduate students and three articles regarding recommendations for ASPs at four-year undergraduate institutions in the United States.

Implications for Implementation

Through this review, multiple academic needs emerged as needing to be supported by ASPs, namely academic coaching, tutoring, and faculty mentorship. Academic coaching seems to be fairly prominent across ASPs, as evidenced by the findings of Shmulsky et al. (2015), Sullivan (2016), and Viesel et al. (2020), but tutoring appears to be hit or miss regarding the effectiveness of what is offered. Directors of ASPs or individuals interested in implementing an ASP should pay close attention to their specific population and seek out potential tutors based on those needs every semester rather than retain the same tutors from semester to semester regardless of expertise. Based on this review, it would behoove directors of ASPs or individuals interested in implementing an ASP to set up a faculty mentoring network such that program participants could be assigned to a specific faculty mentor within their area of interest from the moment they enter the program.

ASPs need to facilitate opportunities for organic social relationships to occur, either with other members of the program or members of the general student population. Although there is much research supporting the efficacy of social skills programs such as the Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS; Laugeson et al., 2015), the results of this review indicate that autistic college students are not enamored with social skills training/groups (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019), suggesting that college students with autism prefer to make social connections more organically.

Another area of need that should be supported within ASPs is mental health support. Gurbuz et al. (2019) and Hamilton and Petty (2023) both found that mental health support is a significant need for autistic individuals, and the findings reported by Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019) and Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff (2019) support this. Only two studies within this review discussed the mental health struggles/needs of autistic students yet, based on existing literature

identifying mental health struggles as a major contributing factor in autistic students' postsecondary persistence (Gurbuz et al., 2019; Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Petcu et al., 2021), this is clearly an area that needs more focus.

Future Research for Further Understanding

Future research should explore the needs of autistic college students in their own words. Many studies that may have relevant information to contribute were excluded from this review because they did not explore needs from the point of view of the student. Additionally, there were multiple studies that were excluded because they were conducted outside of the United States and/or were not focused specifically on students currently enrolled in four-year undergraduate degree programs. Though studies conducted outside of the United States and/or with students in two-year programs, recent graduates, and/or graduate students are certainly relevant, more studies focused on autistic undergraduate students in the United States are needed for generalizability across four-year programs in the United States and to best inform appropriate practices for ASPs at these institutions. Experimental studies were also excluded because the scope of this literature review was to explore the needs of autistic college students from their perspective rather than to determine the effectiveness of interventions. The results of this literature review may be used to inform future research on effective interventions to meet the identified needs of autistic college students.

There is also a substantial need for further research on existing ASPs. Only three articles concerning ASPs at four-year postsecondary institutions emerged that explored what is being done to support postsecondary autistic students in those programs. Though the number of autistic students entering postsecondary education is on the rise (Dwyer et al., 2023), research on these students' unique needs and the ASPs designed to meet them remains woefully inadequate,

particularly within the context of four-year institutions. This lack of research leaves autistic students at four-year institutions without the research-driven practices and support necessary to effectively increase their retention and persistence rates. To effectively fulfill this need, future research must be done to examine what ASPs are providing and doing for their autistic students and then compare that data to the students' self-identified support needs to ensure alignment. To further this, researchers need to understand the decision-making processes of ASP administrators, the barriers they encounter to providing services and supports, and how they solicit and respond to feedback. This understanding will allow researchers to build research-driven models for ASPs that will successfully meet the needs of the students they serve.

Limitations

There are multiple limitations to this systematic review. First, the parameters of my search terms did not include "ASD", which is a common abbreviation for autism spectrum disorder. Despite this oversight, by searching my Boolean string through the full text, it is probable that articles using "ASD" also used "autism" at least one time within the manuscript. Also likely contributing to this was my choice of databases. At least one article identified through the ancestral search was found in a journal that is not housed within EBSCO at all, while another article that was found through the ancestral search was published in a journal that only recently joined EBSCO, so the volume in which the article is located was published prior to the journal's inclusion. Future reviews should include the term "ASD" in the Boolean string and include additional databases that include literature related to this topic, such as ProQuest and PsycInfo.

Likely the most limiting factor was the inclusion of "AND program" in the search. Including this may have excluded articles that were focused on autistic students' experiences and

needs without the addition of a support program; this may have contributed to the fact that only half of the studies included in this review came from my original search. Changing the Boolean string from “AND program” to “OR program” would realistically have identified the articles that were found through the ancestral search in the initial results. Relatedly, the small number of articles that met the inclusion criteria and were related specifically to ASPs ($n = 3$) is insufficient to draw any salient solutions. Broadening the inclusion criteria to include programs in community colleges may provide a better picture of these programs and how they are supporting autistic students’ needs in higher education.

Finally, by focusing solely on published, peer-reviewed works, I automatically screened out documents that may have additional information to contribute to our knowledge of this topic. Most notably, my search produced several dissertations that were focused on ASPs. Given the disparity between published, peer-reviewed articles and dissertations covering ASPs, it is apparent that this is a topic of much interest that is not being published.

Conclusion

As diagnoses of ASD increase, so will the enrollment of autistic individuals in college increase. Postsecondary institutions need to be prepared for this influx of students and have systems in place to support them on their educational journey. Generally, the literature shows that autistic students are looking primarily for academic supports in the form of academic coaching, faculty mentors, and tutoring, as well as social supports in the way of assistance with developing a social network, navigating group work, and improving social skills through organic social interactions. It also emerged that autistic students in higher education seek supports related to self-determination skills and accommodations. This review indicates that autism support programs tend to focus on academic coaching, but they may be overlooking the need for tutoring

and faculty mentorship. Additionally, there is a need for ASPs to move away from structured social skills instruction and toward creating opportunities for organic social connections to be made. Future studies should further explore the needs of autistic college students and how ASPs are meeting those needs so that programs specifically designed to effectively support the needs of these neurodivergent students can be implemented, thereby increasing retention and graduation rates among this population and increasing postsecondary enrollment by attracting autistic students from around the globe.

Chapter 3

Method

The goal of this project was to meaningfully contribute to what we currently know about postsecondary autism support programs (ASPs) at four-year institutions in the United States (U.S.) and relate what we learned back to the research regarding the areas of need for autistic students in postsecondary education. To that end, the study focused on the perspectives of those presumably the most knowledgeable about program services, supports, and decision-making processes: ASP directors/administrators. As such, the research questions for this project were:

- (1) What supports are ASPs currently providing for autistic students at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S., and how do these supports correspond with the areas of need for this population identified through a review of the literature?
- (2) How do ASP administrators at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S. decide which services to provide?
- (3) What practices do ASP administrators at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S. report to be most and least beneficial for program participants?

Research Design

I employed a multi-method research design for this study. This was the most appropriate design because the methods I used “incorporate[d] quantitative and qualitative elements that [were] studied, analyzed, and interpreted separately” (Hott et al., 2021, p. 240). The first research question (RQ1) for this study was answered through quantitative methods (survey) and qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews), and questions two (RQ2) and three (RQ3) were answered entirely through qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews).

Data for RQ1 for this project was collected using a descriptive survey followed by semi-structured interviews. The survey was administered online through Qualtrics, so chosen because it is the platform with which I am the most familiar, and the University of Oklahoma (OU) maintains a license that allows faculty, staff, and students to use it at no cost while ensuring the privacy of survey respondents. I chose to answer this question via survey in addition to interviews because the goal was to obtain descriptive information from a large group of respondents in a relatively short period of time (Hott et al., 2021). Research Question 1 could have been answered by incorporating the survey questions into the interview protocol; however, responses would have been limited to only those who agreed to participate in an interview, thereby limiting the knowledge to be gained about the larger population of ASPs. Additionally, adding these questions to the interview protocol would have increased the time requirement to complete the interview, which may have reduced the number of people who were willing to engage in the interview process.

Viezel et al. (2020) provided another alternative to a survey when they sought to answer a similar question by reviewing websites to gather as much information as possible and calling program administrators when the data they were seeking was not readily available. While still an option, this practice would have proven quite time-consuming and would likely not have fully yielded the information I was seeking; in my experience, not all of the information I was seeking through the survey was consistently provided on programs' websites. Additionally, the number of postsecondary ASPs doubled from 55, as identified by Viezel and colleagues (2020), to 110 listed on the College Autism Network website (CAN; n.d.).

I chose to answer RQ2 and RQ3 for this project through semi-structured interviews rather than open-ended survey questions because I sought to identify detailed descriptions of

participants' perspectives through follow-up questions and further discussion (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018), which are not possible with online surveys. Because my research questions for this project did not fit within the philosophic assumptions of traditional qualitative approaches, I employed a generic qualitative methodology (Caelli, 2003; Merriam, 1998), drawn primarily from phenomenological and case study methodologies. Neither of these methodologies was appropriate in their purest form because, though I was looking at a specific phenomenon, I was exploring the perspectives of my participants rather than their lived experiences (phenomenology; Creswell & Poth, 2018), and while I was looking to give an in-depth understanding of multiple cases, my design did not involve multiple information sources (case study; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The other primary qualitative methodologies did not fit because I was not seeking to describe individual experiences (narrative; Creswell & Poth, 2018), generate a theory (grounded theory; Creswell & Poth, 2018), or understand common patterns of a culture or group (ethnography; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Studies employing a generic qualitative method "simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved" (Merriam, 1998, p. 11).

To better inform follow-up questions to the survey in the interviews, I reviewed the program websites for each interview participant, primarily looking at mission statements and program goals. The data gleaned from participants' program websites allowed me to gain more thorough and rich depictions of each program, thereby increasing trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, this data allowed for a comparison between program ideals and realities.

Positionality

Two years ago, I created and became the director of an ASP. Before that, I was a senior administrator of the university's disability resource center (DRC) for several years. In my time at the DRC, I personally saw the issues autistic students faced, including struggles with self-advocacy, executive functioning, time management, effective communication, and sense of belonging. I worked with several autistic students who were put on academic probation, had to take a semester (or two) off, or left the university altogether. Even before working at the DRC, I saw firsthand the impacts having an autism spectrum disorder can have on college success and retention. As two examples among many, my younger sister and cousin are autistic, and I saw them struggle significantly in college. My cousin was able to graduate, but my sister failed all her classes and dropped out after one semester. Besides being autistic, these individuals shared the experience of trying to make a square peg fit into a round hole; the traditional college environment is built for the neurotypical student, thus effectively excluding the neurodivergent student. For example, many instructors use convoluted, figurative, and/or flowery language, assuming understanding, which can be very confusing for an autistic student; without effective communication and self-advocacy skills, however, the student may not be willing or able to express their confusion to the professor.

Through my experiences watching these intelligent, capable individuals struggle and, at times, fail, it has become increasingly important to me to champion their right to equal access and a fair opportunity to successfully earn a college degree. To ensure this, I believe autistic students need access to a trusted mentor who can support them and assist with navigating the postsecondary environment and a space where they feel safe to seek the assistance they need; in essence, they need a resource designed specifically to meet their unique needs. Though it is certainly not perfect, I largely subscribe to the social justice model of disability, wherein

individuals are largely and systemically disabled by an ableist environment as opposed to their own deficiencies (Shakespeare, 2006). The combination of my personal experiences with the barriers imposed upon autistic students and the social justice model of disability has made this topic extremely and personally relevant to me.

Theoretical Framework

I conducted this study through the lens of Critical Autism Studies (CAS), a relatively modern framework developed by Davidson and Orsini (2013) that is related and complementary to the broader field of Critical Disability Studies. CAS is rooted in the social justice model of disability and approaches research from an abilities-focused lens, as opposed to the oft-used deficit focus employed by researchers when examining disability in general and autism in particular (Davidson & Orsini, 2013). Recognizing that autism does not occur in a vacuum, recent iterations of CAS have emphasized the importance of incorporating intersectionality into the framework to augment understanding of autistic individuals' lived experiences within sociocultural contexts (Mallipeddi & VanDaalen, 2022; O'Dell et al., 2016; Woods et al., 2018). Using CAS as a theoretical framework for this project informed the ways in which I interviewed my participants, ensuring that I was focusing on the ability and intersectionality of the students served by ASPs and informed analysis of the interview data when creating and interpreting the codebook.

Participants

Participants were ASP program administrators at four-year postsecondary institutions in the U.S. and were recruited primarily from the ASPs included on the CAN website (n.d.), and later through the CAN Listserv (n.d.) for autism support professionals. This website was chosen because it offered the most comprehensive and current list of ASPs in the U.S. and was the most

user-friendly. Other websites with lists of ASPs exist, but they were ruled out as resources for various reasons (e.g., outdated information, difficult navigation, inability to filter out institutions not meeting the inclusion criteria, and/or an incomplete list of programs).

Institutional Review Board (IRB) permissions were sought and secured before commencing data collection, and participants were asked to provide consent before taking part in both the survey and the interview. Participant incentives were offered in the form of Amazon gift cards, funded through graduate student research grants. The initial email recruited for both the survey and the follow-up interview (see [Appendix C](#)); emails recruiting specifically for the survey and the interview separately were sent after the initial email and subsequent reminders went out (see [Appendices D-E](#)).

According to the CAN website (n.d.), there were a total of 110 ASPs at four-year postsecondary institutions in the U.S. at the time of data collection, including the one for which I am the current director. To construct a list of autism support program administrators at these institutions, I created an Excel spreadsheet listing each program and then went to each of their websites. I reviewed each website to find the ASP's administrator/director and added the information to the spreadsheet. Often, the program would be encompassed within a larger department (e.g., disability services, counseling center, student affairs) with no specific ASP director listed. In that case, I chose the person I deemed most likely to be over the program, typically the department's director. In addition to the ASP's administrator/director, I added their phone number, email address, and website address. Through this process, I was unable to find email addresses for eight program administrators, so I called the number on each ASP's website to request the information; from this, I was able to obtain email addresses for six of the programs and add them to my distribution list. Of the 110 ASPs, two were deemed ineligible because I was

unable to obtain an email address, and four were deemed ineligible because they were an online program, they were in the process of rebuilding and were currently inactive, they were at a 2-year institution, and they no longer existed, respectively. My final distribution list consisted of 104 programs, including my own. I completed the survey on behalf of my program to check the workflows; because the survey was entirely objective with no opportunity for subjectivity, I included my responses in data analysis to provide an additional data point for what is currently offered by these programs.

Two months into data collection, I learned of the CAN Listserv. The recruitment emails I sent to my initial distribution list had not yielded any volunteers for the follow-up interview, so I modified the IRB application to expand recruitment to this resource. The CAN Listserv (n.d.) consists of 773 autism support professionals, researchers, and scholars who sought membership within the group. It is housed within Google Groups and is free to join. Members can directly share research, presentation, and/or publication opportunities, questions, resources, and experiences with the group through email. The first distribution through this channel recruited primarily for the interview, with a request to complete the survey before we met. The second distribution consisted of the initial email that recruited primarily for the survey, with a request to schedule a follow-up interview. Upon sending the survey recruitment email to the CAN Listserv, I was informed of the CAN ASP Director Listserv (n.d.), which consists of 266 verified ASP directors/administrators who sought to be included on the distribution list. Similar to the general CAN Listserv, the ASP Director-specific Listserv is housed within Google Groups, and members can directly share research, presentation, and/or publication opportunities, questions, resources, and experiences with the group through email. I sent the survey recruitment email to the ASP Director Listserv on the same day that it was sent to the general CAN Listserv. I opted not to

send a separate interview recruitment email to the ASP Directors because the request was included at the end of the survey, and my interview-specific recruitment efforts had been so successful.

Survey Participants

An invitation to participate was sent via email to my self-created list of ASP administrators at four-year institutions. To increase response rates, I offered a financial incentive in the form of the opportunity to win one of three \$30 Amazon gift cards. The initial recruitment email was sent a total of three times to those who did not complete the survey (Nulty, 2008); unresponsive parties received a reminder email at weeks two and five after the initial communication. I had intended to send the reminder email at weeks two and four following initial disbursement; however, week four fell on the Thanksgiving holiday, so I opted to wait a week for optimal visibility. I sent an additional email recruiting solely for the survey to the CAN general and ASP Director Listservs (n.d.) in the second week of January (10 weeks after the initial disbursement to my self-created list; see [Appendix D](#)). Though individual survey responses are de-identified and reported in aggregate, participants were asked to identify their institutions to identify geographical regions and allow me the opportunity to contact them with any follow-up questions. All data was housed in a password-protected folder on a secure platform owned by the University (i.e., Microsoft Teams).

I expected to see a response rate of around 20-25%, or about 25 responses. I received a total of 54 responses for a response rate of around 50% of the number of ASPs as identified by the CAN; however, two responses were rejected, as both yielded no responses past the first few questions. Of the program administrators recruited through my self-created list of programs derived from the CAN website, 38 surveys were started, but only 34 were completed (total

response rate of 37%; completion rate of surveys that were started was 89%). An additional 20 responses were generated from the recruitment email sent to the CAN Listserv. Ultimately, a total of 52 program administrators took the survey, though 13 did not take it to completion, and 36 of the remaining 39 programs chose not to provide an answer for at least one question on the instrument. To maintain transparency, non-responses are noted in the results.

Interview Participants

The interview information (including compensation) was included in the initial recruitment email, and there was a question at the end of the survey asking if the participant would be willing to engage in a 60-minute semi-structured interview to explore their program further. Compensation information was not included in the recruitment question at the end of the survey. Participants who responded in the affirmative were taken to a separate, independent Qualtrics form to enter their contact information and schedule their interview. This information was not to be included in the dataset, and interview participants were to be compensated with a \$40 Amazon gift card for their time.

Following three unsuccessful attempts at recruiting interview participants through the survey, however, I submitted an IRB modification to expand recruitment to include the CAN Listserv, which is made up of autism support professionals, including ASP directors and administrators, and increase interview compensation to \$50 with an additional \$10 incentive to also complete the survey (participants were also still eligible to win one of the \$30 Amazon gift cards if they completed the survey). The modification request was approved, and seven weeks after the initial email campaign, I sent an email recruiting solely for the interview (see [Appendix E](#)) to my self-created list of program administrators and the CAN Listserv. This process yielded the six interviews that are included in this study.

To inform potential participants as to what the interview would entail, they were given the interview questions in advance, and they were made aware that they would have the choice to engage in the interview face-to-face via Zoom or over the phone, as offering multiple interview formats is recommended to meet the diverse needs of participants (Bailey et al., 2020; Sarrett, 2018). Pseudonyms were used to protect the anonymity of interview participants. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms, thereby granting them the power to choose how they wished to be publicly known and removing the potential for unintentionally causing harm by choosing a name that may be offensive or hurtful to the participant (Itzik & Walsh, 2023). Four of the six participants opted to choose their own pseudonyms.

Andy. Andy is a 33-year-old White individual who uses he/him pronouns. He earned his B.M. degree in music education and is currently working on a M.S. in Innovation and Leadership. Andy is from an ASP in the Southeast region of the U.S. and has been with his program for three years. He does not identify as neurodivergent, and he chose his own pseudonym.

Aaliyah. Aaliyah is a 31-year-old White individual who uses she/her pronouns. She earned her M.S. in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC). She is with an ASP in the Northeast region of the U.S. and has been with her program for five and a half years. She does not identify as neurodivergent, and she opted to allow me to choose her pseudonym.

Cam. Cam is a 39-year-old White individual with a Ph.D. who uses she/her pronouns. She is with an ASP in the Southeast region of the U.S. and has been with her program in some capacity since 2013; Cam has been the Director of her program since 2018. She does not identify as neurodivergent, and she chose her own pseudonym.

Evan. Evan is a 37-year-old White individual who uses she/her pronouns. She earned her M.S. in Rehabilitation Counseling and is an LPC and Certified Rehabilitation Counselor. She is with an ASP in the Southwest region of the U.S. and has been with her program for three years. She does identify as neurodivergent, and she chose her own pseudonym.

Maggie. Maggie is a White individual who uses she/her pronouns and has an M.A. in English. She is with an ASP in the Northeast region of the U.S. and has been with her program for four years. She does identify as neurodivergent, and she opted to allow me to choose her pseudonym.

Michael. Michael is a 33-year-old White individual who uses they/them pronouns. They have an M.Ed. and are working on their Ph.D. in Educational Psychology. They are with an ASP in the Southwest region of the U.S. and have been with the program for two years. Michael does identify as neurodivergent, and they chose their own pseudonym.

Data Collection

Data was collected using multiple methods, including a descriptive survey and semi-structured follow-up interviews. To minimize bias, I engaged in reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis (Giddens & Sutton, 2014), noting my “values, dispositions, attitudes, and perceptions, which [I brought] from [my] social background to the field” (Priya, 2020 p. 107) in a positionality statement before reporting and analyzing the data (Weber, 1949).

Survey Instrument

The purpose of the survey in this project was to gather information on the current offerings of ASPs at four-year institutions across the U.S. The survey was adapted with permission from a survey created by Dr. Gena Barnhill (2016) and asked participants what support services their ASP offered and collected information about admissions requirements and

funding sources, as well as basic demographic data about the program itself and the institution at which the program was located. Dr. Barnhill developed their survey in 2013 through a literature review of supports offered at the time and feedback from several colleagues. One of the key differences between my survey and the one developed by Dr. Barnhill was that their survey was geared toward universities in general regarding their support for students with Asperger's syndrome or high-functioning autism, whereas my survey was geared specifically toward ASPs and their support of students on the autism spectrum. I adapted Dr. Barnhill's survey to reflect the targeted population of ASPs, rather than postsecondary institutions in general, and updated the types of potential supports to mirror the most recently available literature and the current needs of autistic college students as identified through my systematic literature review. Additionally, I added questions about the geographic region of each program, program staff, participant demographics, the program application, funding source(s), and support level offerings to gain a more thorough picture of how programs are structured and which students are using the programs.

The instrument consisted of 24 questions across six sections: (a) General Institution Profile (#1-6), (b) Program Admissions (#7), (c) Program Profile (#8-11), (d) Participant Demographics (#12-15), (e) Program Supports (#16-18), (f) Program Funding (#19-23), and (g) Program Metrics (#24). The "Program Admissions" section included a list of existing admission requirements as identified by Viezel et al. (2020), while the "Program Supports" section included a list of 22 examples of supports cultivated from the literature (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff, 2019; Viezel et al., 2020) and the current needs of autistic college students. Participants were instructed to indicate the primary provider of each support offering, whether that be the ASP, a different department within the institution, or the support

was not offered at all. This section also provided participants with the opportunity to write in supports being offered that were not listed. The complete survey was expected to take approximately 20 minutes to complete and can be found in [Appendix F](#).

Semi-Structured Interviews

The interview protocol consisted of four level-one and 13 level-two questions. The first question was related to RQ1 and was designed to elaborate on information gathered from the survey. The remaining questions were intended to answer RQ2 and RQ3. The level-one interview protocol included the following questions:

- (1) In your survey, you indicated you offer XYZ supports. Will you please elaborate on what those look like?
- (2) How did/do you decide which services to provide?
- (3) What practices have you found to be most beneficial for program participants?
- (4) What practices have you found to be least beneficial for program participants?

Level-two questions were designed to gain a deeper understanding of participants' responses and are detailed in [Appendix G](#).

To accommodate the diverse needs of participants, they were given the choice to engage in the interview face-to-face via Zoom or over the phone (Bailey et al., 2020; Sarrett, 2018).

Interviews were recorded and preliminarily transcribed with transcription software, after which I reviewed and edited the transcripts as necessary for accuracy. To ensure accurate transcription, I employed member-checking by sending individual transcripts to the corresponding participant, who had the opportunity to provide correction and/or clarification as they saw fit (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis

For the survey data, I calculated descriptive statistics, namely frequency distributions and measures of central tendency (where appropriate). I chose these methods because I was seeking a description of what was being offered with the goal of aggregating ASP characteristics and determining the prevalence of supports being provided (Bhandari, 2023; Hahs-Vaughn & Lomax, 2020).

Before reviewing the qualitative data, I used member-checking to ensure the accuracy of my transcriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and provided the participants the opportunity to provide clarification as they saw fit; no clarifications were made. To generate the codebook, I used the procedure outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) as a guideline. I began by reading each transcript multiple times to “achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole as one would read a novel” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). During these read-throughs, I documented my first impressions and thoughts using different colored pens and highlighters to begin noting ideas that were aligned with my research questions and/or seemed to come up more than once. I used that information to create an initial coding scheme and began sorting these into overarching categories centered around the relations and interactions between the different codes, which were then sorted into meaningful groups (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2002). This allowed me to craft definitions across each tier of the coding scheme and create exemplars of such (see [Table 8](#); Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Once I had established a coding scheme, I reviewed the documents a third time and highlighted responses accordingly. From there, I was able to determine common themes. Themes were identified using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999), as this is an appropriate method when the researcher is attempting to describe a phenomenon with a limited research base (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). My coding scheme and all transcripts were then

loaded under a single project into NVivo, so chosen because OU maintains a license for use by faculty, staff, and students at no additional cost. I reviewed each transcript a fourth time within NVivo, this time using the software to assign text to the coding scheme in accordance with my highlighted responses from the physical read-throughs. Finally, I created a case classification titled “Participants,” which included each of the six transcribed interviews and included attributes for age, certifications, education, neurodivergent status, pronouns, pseudonym, race/ethnicity, and time with the program for easy identification when describing each interview participant.

Final Codebook

After adding the codes from my manual read-throughs to NVivo, I generated a report for each code, regardless of where it was in the hierarchy (i.e., parent, child, or grandchild code) for the purposes of transferring the coded text to a spreadsheet for simpler interpretation and evaluation. My initial coding scheme included 12 parent codes: services/supports, peer mentors, barriers, collaborations, program space, student demographics, program requirements, budget, funding, tiers, decision-making, and future directions; and 10 child codes: social activities, independent living, career development, academics, most beneficial, and least beneficial (under services/supports); the College Autism Network, feedback, and decision-makers (under decision-making); and parent communication (under collaborations).

As I was adding the codes to NVivo and later transferring the coded text to my spreadsheet, it became apparent that some of my codes could be consolidated, some child codes needed to be made into their own parent codes, and some parent codes should be broken down into child codes; through this process, I also added grandchild codes. Eight parent codes were included in the final codebook: services and supports, program expectations, and funding sources

(RQ1); decision-making processes, collaboration with stakeholders, and barriers to providing services (RQ2); and program effectiveness and future directions (RQ3). Under these parent codes were 25 child codes: academic services and supports, career development/employment skills services and supports, independent living services and supports, mental health services and supports, person-centered planning, peer mentoring, dedicated program space, social services and supports, and workshops and/or program-specific courses (services and supports); decision-makers, direct and indirect feedback, involvement with national professional organizations, other ASPs, partnerships with Vocational Rehabilitation, and review of the literature (decision-making processes); collaboration with campus stakeholders and collaboration with students' parents (collaboration with stakeholders); external barriers, institutional barriers, lack of student engagement, lack of staffing, concerns regarding funding, and concerns regarding space (barriers to providing services); and beneficial practices and less beneficial practices (program effectiveness). Grandchild codes included: career services, disability services, campus housing, professional programs, tutoring resources (collaboration with campus stakeholders) and individual meetings between student and mentor/coach, peer mentoring, social events, relationships with faculty, dedicated program space, avenues for non-verbal communication, transparency in communication, and therapy (beneficial practices; see [Appendix I](#)).

Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of my findings. To increase the validity of the survey instrument, I started with an existing survey that was developed by Dr. Gena Barnhill (2016) through a literature review of supports offered at the time and feedback from several colleagues. To ensure that the questions were currently relevant and valid, I adapted Dr. Barnhill's survey based on the most recently available literature and the current needs of

autistic college students as identified through my systematic literature review. Finally, I sought feedback from colleagues in the field, including two members of the university's Special Education faculty.

After editing the interview transcripts for accuracy, I employed member checking to further ensure transcript accuracy, as well as to provide participants with the opportunity to make corrections and clarifications to the transcript; none were made (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, I reviewed interview participants' program websites to substantiate the data collected through their survey responses and further inform the level two questions I asked each individual participant (see [Appendix H](#)). Lastly, I maintained transparency in my data collection and analysis to provide a thorough audit trail, keeping and referring back often to all interview notes, transcriptions, initial impressions and analyses, and thoughts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Madaus et al., 2023; Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Chapter 4

Results

As previously noted, 52 program administrators took the survey, though there were several instances where multiple individuals chose not to respond to one or more of the questions. The questions that were more often left blank were regarding program demographics. As indicated by one respondent, the reason for this was that they do not collect demographic information on their students. The number of responses for each individual question ranged from 38 to 52, with the exception of the demographic questions, which ranged from 16 to 29 responses per question. I chose to include the surveys with missing data points to give a clearer picture of what programs are doing in the areas where I had the data; if I had excluded all surveys with at least one missing data point, I would have been left with three surveys. To maintain full transparency, non-responses are included in the frequency tables (see Tables 8-31). Eleven individuals agreed to participate in a follow-up interview; however, five were excluded from this dissertation for various reasons: one participant canceled their appointment and neglected to reschedule; one participant canceled and attempted to reschedule, but our schedules did not align; one participant led a neurodiversity initiative that was not a true ASP; and two participants had been in their role for only a few months and were unable to provide meaningful answers to the interview questions. The six participants whose interviews were included represent the Northeast, Southeast, and Southwest regions of the U.S. and ranged in age from 31-39 years old. Four used she/her pronouns, one used he/him, and one used they/them. Levels of education included one master's degree-in-progress, three earned master's degrees, one PhD-in-progress, and one earned PhD. Three of the six interview participants identified as neurodivergent (though

not necessarily autistic), and their lengths of time as administrators of their respective programs ranged from two to seven years, with an average of just over four years.

Research Question One

To answer the first research question (RQ1), “What supports are ASPs currently providing for autistic students at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S., and do these supports correspond with the areas of need for this population identified through a review of the literature?”, descriptive statistics, namely frequency distribution and measures of central tendency (where appropriate), were calculated for the survey responses, and the first interview question asked for elaboration on what is being offered and why. The second part of RQ1, “Do these supports correspond with the areas of need for this population identified through a review of the literature?” will be explored in the next chapter.

Survey Results

In this section, I will detail the survey results, beginning with institution demographics, followed by program demographics, admissions, offerings, and funding sources, and ending with program metrics. Each survey participant represented one ASP, so each survey response should correspond with a unique ASP. Percentages for this section were calculated based on the number of responses for each question rather than the total number of survey participants.

Institution Demographics. Of the 52 responses, 22 (42.3%) were public institutions, while 30 (57.7%) were private (see [Table 9](#)). Ten were located in the Midwest region of the U.S. (i.e., Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin); 19 were located in the Northeast region of the U.S. (i.e., Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont); nine were located in the Southeast region of the

U.S. (i.e., Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, D.C., West Virginia); eight were located in the Southwest region of the U.S. (i.e., Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas); and six were located in the West region of the U.S. (Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawai'i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming; see [Table 10](#)). Three institutions (5.8%) held a total enrollment of less than 1,000 undergraduate students, 15 institutions (28.8%) enrolled a total of 1,000-4,999 undergraduate students, 13 institutions (25.0%) had undergraduate enrollment counts of 5,000-9,999, 12 institutions (23.1%) had 10,000-25,000 undergraduate students enrolled, and nine institutions (17.3%) had a total undergraduate enrollment of greater than 25,000 (see [Table 11](#)).

The total number of undergraduate students registered with the institution's disability resource center (DRC) ranged from less than 500 students (nine institutions; 17.3%) to greater than 2,000 students (11 institutions; 21.2%). Five institutions (9.6%) registered between 500-999 students with the DRC, three (5.8%) registered 1,000-1,499 students with the DRC, and two (3.8%) registered 1,500-2,000 undergraduate students with the institution's DRC; 22 respondents did not have that information (see [Table 12](#)). Of those students registered with the institution's DRC, two respondents (3.8%) indicated that less than 10 were autistic, five (9.6%) reported 10-49 autistic students registered with the DRC, nine (17.3%) reported 50-99 autistic students registered with the DRC, 10 (19.2%) indicated that the number of autistic students registered with the DRC was between 100-200, and five (9.6%) showed registration of greater than 200 autistic undergraduate students with the institution's DRC; 21 (40.4%) were unable to provide this information (see [Table 13](#)).

ASP Demographics. Survey responses indicated that across the 48 programs that provided an answer, there were a total of 114 full-time program staff ($M = 2.19$), 87 part-time program staff ($M = 1.71$), 67 Graduate Assistants ($M = 1.25$), 49 interns ($M = .94$), and 78 undergraduate student workers ($M = 1.53$; see [Table 14](#)). Of the 48 responses we received for this question, three programs (6.3%) served less than five students, six (12.5%) served 5-9 students, eight (16.7%) served 10-19 students, 14 served 20-30 students (29.2%), and 17 (35.4%) served more than 30 undergraduate students; four participants did not provide a response (see [Table 15](#)). Of the 48 responses we received, all programs represented in the survey responses had been in existence for at least one year; five (10.4%) had been around for one to two years, two to three years, and three to five years, respectively; 33 (68.8%) had existed for more than five years. As with the number of students served, four participants did not provide a response (see [Table 16](#)). Of the 49 responses we received, 21 programs (42.9%) reported not supporting students with additional diagnoses, while 28 programs (57.1%) reported in the affirmative. Three participants did not respond to the question (see [Table 17](#)). Of the 28 participants who responded that they supported additional diagnoses, six (20%) indicated that while all of their students were required to have an ASD diagnosis, many also had comorbid diagnoses that influenced support needs; 18 (60%) provided supports for any neurodivergent student, regardless of the specific diagnosis; three (10%) also provided supports for students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); one (3.3%) provided supports for students with a learning disability; and two (6.7%) indicated that they also supported students with mental health diagnoses (see [Table 18](#)).

While demographic information for program participants was requested, there was a high non-response rate, with some indicating that they did not collect demographic information and others simply not providing an answer. Consistent with similar studies (e.g., Barnhill, 2016;

Viezel et al., 2020), the students being served were predominantly identified as White and male (61.2% and 58.2%, respectively). Based on the information that was collected, 576 White students (61.2%, $M = 25.04$, 28 missing responses) were being supported as of the survey date. Also served were 50 Black/African American students (5.3%, $M = 2.38$, 31 missing responses), 27 Hispanic/Latinx students (2.9%, $M = 1.42$, 33 missing responses), one Indigenous/Native American student (0.1%, $M = .06$, 35 missing responses), 50 Asian/Pacific Islander students (5.3%, $M = 2.5$, 32 missing responses), 11 Middle Eastern students (1.2%, $M = .58$, 33 missing responses), and five students classified as “other” (0.5%, $M = .31$, 36 missing responses); two hundred twenty-one students were classified as being of unknown race/ethnicity (23.5%, $M = 10.52$, 31 missing responses; see [Table 19](#)). Regarding gender, 601 of the reported students served identified as male (58.2%, $M = 20.03$, 23 missing responses), while 246 identified as female (23.8%, $M = 8.48$, 23 missing responses) and 186 identified as being non-binary (18%, $M = 6.89$, 25 missing responses; see [Table 20](#)).

Students supported by the responding programs ranged in age from less than 18 to over 25, with the majority falling between the ages of 18 and 23 (see [Table 21](#)). Specifically, participants identified one student as being under the age of 18 (0.2%, $M = .06$, 34 missing responses), 181 students as falling between the ages of 18 and 19 (33.7%, $M = 8.62$, 32 missing responses), 185 students as being aged 20 to 21 (34.5%, $M = 8.81$, 32 missing responses), 123 students as 22 to 23 years old (22.9%, $M = 5.86$, 32 missing responses), 35 students as being 24 to 25 years old (6.5%, $M = 1.75$, 33 missing responses), and 12 students over the age of 25 (2.2%, $M = .67$, 35 missing responses) that were being served (see [Table 21](#)). At the time of the survey, no concurrently enrolled high school students were being served, and the largest group served was freshmen (322, 33.6%, $M = 11.93$, 26 missing responses). Participants indicated also serving

a total of 229 sophomores (24.1%, $M = 8.48$, 26 missing responses), 195 juniors (20.6%, $M = 7.80$, 28 missing responses), 183 seniors (19.3%, $M = 6.79$, 26 missing responses), and 20 graduate students (2.1%, $M = 9.52$, 32 missing responses; see [Table 22](#)).

ASP Admissions Requirements. [Table 23](#) details the frequency of individual admissions requirements. Only two options were required across more than 50% of programs: an interview (25 programs, 61.0%, 11 missing responses) and proof of admission to the institution (35 programs, 85.4%, 11 missing responses). Conversely, over 50% of respondents indicated that several options were not required for admission, including an age cutoff (36 programs, 87.8%, 8 missing responses), application fee (36 programs, 87.8%, 11 missing responses), essay/personal statement (33 programs, 80.5%, 11 missing responses), minimum grade point average (GPA) requirement (31 programs, 75.6%, 11 missing responses), IQ Cutoff (34 programs, 82.9%, 11 missing responses), letter(s) of recommendation (33 programs, 80.5%, 11 missing responses), parent short-answer questions (26 programs, 63.4%, 11 missing responses), picture (37 programs, 90.2%, 11 missing responses), transcript (22 programs, 53.7%, 11 missing responses), and video statement (37 programs, 92.5%, 12 missing responses). Other options that were similarly as likely to be required as not were a high school IEP/504 plan, program application, proof of diagnosis, psychological/neuropsychological evaluation, registration with the institution's DRC, and student short-answer questions. See [Table 23](#) for a full detailing of program admissions requirements by frequency.

ASP Offerings. Survey responses indicated that the most likely supports/services to be offered solely by other departments within the institution (i.e., greater than 50% of responses) were academic accommodations (35, 89.7%), alternate proctored testing site (34, 87.2%), housing accommodations (30, 76.9%), internships (23, 59.0%), mental health counseling (30,

76.9%), note takers (34, 87.2%), and tutoring/tutoring assistance (35, 89.7%). Conversely, the supports/services most likely to be uniquely provided directly by the ASP were executive functioning coaching (27, 69.2%), independent living skills development/instruction (24, 61.5%), individual meetings (31, 81.6%), peer mentors (22, 56.4%), person-centered planning (29, 74.4%), social activities (22, 56.4%), and social skills instruction (30, 76.9%). Life coaching was the only support/service offered solely and directly by the ASPs not meeting the 50% threshold but still constituting the majority with at least 30% of programs (17, 43.6%). Program-specific courses were slightly less likely to be provided by the ASP (13, 34.2%) than to not be provided at all at the institution (15, 39.5%); proctored study halls were equally as likely to be uniquely offered by the ASP as they were to not be provided at all (14, 35.9%). Only one support/service was predominantly not offered at all at the institution: a summer transition program (18, 47.4%; see [Table 24](#) for a full detailing of unique program offerings by ASPs vs. other departments).

Several supports/services were offered by both the ASP and a different department within the institution. When including these numbers, there was an increase of at least six (15%) in the number of ASPs offering employment/career skills development (24 vs. 10, 61.5% vs. 25.6%), executive functioning coaching (33 vs. 27, 84.6% vs. 69.2%), individual meetings (35 vs. 29, 92.1% vs. 76.3%), internships (12 vs. 5, 30.8% vs. 12.8%), peer mentors (29 vs. 22, 74.3% vs. 56.4%), social activities (36 vs. 22, 92.3% vs. 56.4%), and workshops/seminars (25 vs. 11, 65.7% vs. 28.9%; see [Table 24](#) for a full detailing of total program offerings by ASPs vs. other departments).

Forty participants responded to the survey question about whether their program offered tiered supports. Of these responses, 23 (57.5%) answered in the affirmative, while 17 (42.5%)

indicated uniform support levels (see [Table 25](#)). When asked to elaborate on the tiered support model, nine participants' programs (37.5%) used a graduated model with a fee (i.e., students were charged a higher initial fee that was reduced as support needs decreased); seven programs used a graduated model with no fee (i.e., all supports/services were offered at no cost to the student, but those supports and services were reduced as support needs decreased); four used an increasing model (i.e., basic supports/services were offered to most students at no cost to them, but more intensive supports/services were available to students for a fee); finally, four participants use alternate methods which were, unfortunately, not described sufficiently to include in this manuscript (see [Table 26](#); [Table 27](#) details support offerings by interview participants, for comparison).

ASP Funding Sources. Though participants were able to indicate multiple funding sources, the majority of responses (23, 59.0%) indicated that program fees were a source of funding. The second most frequent source of funding was institutional funds (17, 43.6%), followed by grants (15, 38.5%) and the Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS; 14, 35.9%). Other sources of funding per survey responses were donations/endowments (9, 23.1%), state funds (5, 12.8%), and other unnamed sources (4, 10.3%; see [Table 28](#)). Of the programs that indicated their program charged a fee for services, two (10%) charged less than \$1,000 per semester, four (20%) charged \$1,000-\$1,999 per semester, two (10%) charged \$2,000-\$2,999 per semester, six (30%) charged \$3,000-\$3,999 and \$4,000-\$5,000, respectively, and two (10%) charged more than \$5,000 per semester (see [Table 29](#)).

Twelve programs (54.5%) offered scholarships for the program fee, whereas 10 (45.5%) did not (see [Table 30](#)). Additional financial support for students in some programs came from DRS. Eleven (52.4%) programs contracted with DRS to pay some or all of the program fees for

eligible students, while 10 (47.6%) did not (see [Table 31](#)). Of the programs that did contract with DRS, three (27.3%) were contracted for a partial amount of the program fee, and eight (72.7%) were contracted for the full program fee (see [Table 32](#)).

ASP Metrics. Survey participants were asked to indicate all the ways in which they measure program success, and most indicated more than one method. The three most common program metrics (i.e., indicated by at least 75% of respondents) were student satisfaction (32, 84.2%), graduation rates (31, 81.6%), and program retention rate (30, 78.9%). Grade point average (26, 68.4%), student goal achievement (25, 65.8%), and institution retention rate (22, 57.9%) were the next most common program metrics (i.e., indicated by 50% to 74% of respondents). Lastly, general employment (17, 44.7%), parent satisfaction (9, 23.7%), and major-specific employment (8, 21.1%) were less common program metrics (indicated by 20%-49% of respondents; see [Table 33](#)).

Quantitative Interview Results

Interestingly, the survey responses regarding program offerings were not entirely corroborated by the interview responses that were received for this study. For example, 100% of interview respondents endorsed executive functioning coaching as being provided by the ASP vs. only 84.6% of survey respondents, 83.3% of interview participants indicated that their program provides independent living skills development/instruction vs. 66.6% of survey respondents, 83.3% of interview participants endorsed proctored study halls vs. 43.6% of survey respondents, 100% of interview participants indicated they provide social skills instruction vs. 82.0% of survey respondents, and 66.7% of interview participants reported offering a summer transition program vs. 31.5% of survey respondents (see [Table 27](#) for a full detailing of program offerings by interview respondents).

An additional area where interview participants' responses contrasted sharply with survey responses was sources of funding. While 43.6% of survey responses indicated that institutional funds were a source of funding for their programs, only one (16.7%) interview participant shared that they received financial support from their institution. The remaining five interview participants (83.3%) stated that they received no financial support from their respective institutions.

Qualitative Interview Results

Three overarching themes emerged from interview participants' responses that were related to RQ1: (a) services and supports, (b) program expectations, and (c) funding source(s); each overarching theme included at least one subtheme.

Services and Supports. This first theme comprised the highest amount of subthemes, which included academics, career development/employment skills, independent living, mental health, person-centered planning, peer mentors, program space, social, and workshops/program-specific courses.

Academic Services and Supports. Encompassed within academic services and supports are executive functioning coaching and proctored study halls. Additionally, some participants discussed tutoring support, in that they regularly referred their students to subject-specific tutoring services housed elsewhere at the institution.

Participants discussed executive functioning coaching as being a prominent feature of their meetings with students, and most reported that they had seen significant improvement in students' GPAs, executive functioning skills, communication, and problem-solving as a result. Aaliyah reported that her program focused more on executive functioning skills and support with their first and second-year students than with their more experienced students, as their goal was

for students to have “built a lot of those skills in their first and second year.” Maggie went so far as to indicate that her program’s primary focus was on students’ executive functioning skills:

We try to focus first on academics and executive functioning. Make sure that they understand their syllabi and their assignments... what they're being asked, putting together a schedule to make sure that they're balancing everything, and they have time for themselves. They're working their [program] requirements into their schedules, those sorts of things.

Michael shared a similar process to Maggie’s regarding helping students with their executive functioning skills, particularly time management, through the use of a schedule. They indicated that most of their students opted to create a handwritten schedule using the weekly timesheet template that they made, which allowed their students to schedule every activity over the course of a week, including classes, due dates, and distinct times blocked for studying, leisure, and self-care. This strategy, Michael said, had led to significant growth and increases in GPA for their students. Andy shared that he addressed executive functioning skills coaching using the GROW model (Goals, Reality, Options, Way forward; Whitmore, 2002), wherein he began by being more directive with his students and then moved them toward being able to independently set goals and derive their own solutions. He gave an example of working with a student to make a schedule based on their course syllabus: “‘Let’s look at it together... let me tell you and walk you through my process...’ [then] as time goes on, [shift to] ‘Okay, what would you do? What would you prioritize?’ and [try] to put that on them more.”

Four of the six interview participants referenced proctored study halls as a program offering. Expectations for attendance varied from none to two hours per week, twice per week, or 40 hours per semester, but all reported that they struggled to maintain engagement in this area.

Nevertheless, a common sentiment among the interview participants was that they continued the practice because they had witnessed greater academic success among the students who regularly utilized the proctored study hall sessions. Cam was the most direct about her students' lack of enthusiasm for study hall, stating, "I think... the most consistent feedback... from students is that study hall is their least favorite part of the program. It's not something that we've done away with because I firmly believe there is a strong benefit to it." Conversely, she also shared that they have some students who "spend a lot more time than the 40 hours per semester in study hall because they recognize that they're more productive when they're here than when they're in their dorm."

Aaliyah's and Evan's programs utilized Graduate Assistants (GAs) to proctor their study hall sessions. To foster accountability, Aaliyah's GAs would ask students what they would be working on when they arrived and what they completed when they left. Evan shared that they "always have somebody in the study hall... but it's really just for body doubling purposes... [the GAs] can support a student with very surface-level things, if not, [they] refer out to the Learning Center, tutoring [services], or their professors." Body doubling is "two individuals occupying the same space, each being aware of each other's presence, where both are working independently on individual tasks" (Born, 2024, p. 10). Andy's and Cam's programs used peer mentors to proctor their study hall sessions.

Career Development/Employment Skills Services and Supports. This subtheme encompasses general career readiness preparation, workshops, internship opportunities, career fairs, and partnerships with the institution's Career Center. Generally, interview participants whose programs offered these services and supports indicated that they did so more thoroughly after students had been in the program for more than a year, with the earlier focus being on

identifying an appropriate major based on the student's strengths, weaknesses, and interests and building good foundational skills in the various facets of executive functioning.

Cam's and Maggie's students began to shift their focus to employment in their junior year when they started working on their resumes, practicing interview skills, learning how to navigate accommodations in the workplace, and applying for jobs and/or internships. Students in Aaliyah's program took a Career Readiness course in their second year, which was designed to encourage students to consider their choice of major in relation to their career goals and interests, to begin developing interview skills, and to begin connecting with potential employers. According to Aaliyah, their goal was for their students to be ready to begin applying for jobs and internships by the end of their second year in the program.

Aaliyah's program employed a Director of Employment Services, whose responsibility was to find and create internship opportunities for their students. This person was also responsible for providing specific support to students in the application and interview processes, as well as helping them to navigate the accommodations process and providing education on that topic. Evan's GAs organized group attendance to relevant career fairs on campus, while students in Cam's program worked with their peer mentors to develop employment skills. Maggie's students primarily worked with an undergraduate student intern (when available) or a career counselor at the institution's Career Development Center to complete a Career Certificate, which included career development workshops, resume writing, and mentorship.

Independent Living Services and Supports. All the interview participants mentioned independent living services and supports, albeit some more briefly than others. The skill most frequently discussed was cooking, mentioned by Aaliyah, Michael, and Evan. Other independent living skills that were brought up included laundry, cleaning, finances, and how to live in a

residence hall. One of the participant's program websites indicated that their staff would do dorm checks for their students. When asked for details, the participant shared that they no longer did dorm checks; however, program staff or a peer mentor would go to a student's dorm to help walk them through a specific task, such as cleaning the bathroom or their room, when requested.

One participant described a unique setup within their program, where they had recently added the option for students to live in a supported residence hall on campus, consisting of a separate house with space for about 15-17 support program participants and an undergraduate Resident Assistant. This unique living arrangement provided students with substantial shared living space and the opportunity to socialize and build community with other autistic students. GAs and program staff provided on-site programming to build household skills and orient students to living with roommates. No other participants reported specific living arrangements for their students, though Cam shared that their students had the opportunity to choose where they lived and with whom before the general housing application opened and that they were guaranteed this accommodation every year they were in the program.

Mental Health Services and Supports. Two interview participants indicated that they provided mental health supports and services for their students, though in very different ways. One of the participants described providing well-being/mindfulness opportunities for their students, which included group activities such as crafting hours and weekly walks. The other participant indicated that their program was able to provide individual therapy for students due to their affiliation with the psychology department and Autism Clinic at their institution. The clinic's director was a licensed clinical psychologist, and because the ASP funded 10% of their salary, they provided and supervised three clinical psychology graduate student clinicians who delivered the individual therapy. This arrangement seemed to be fairly unique across ASPs, as

only nine (23.1%) survey participants indicated that their program directly provided mental health counseling.

Person-Centered Planning Services and Supports. Only five of the six interview participants endorsed person-centered planning (PCP) in their survey; however, all six described efforts indicating that they engage in PCP through regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings. Andy referred to his PCP efforts with students as a “holistic approach to coaching,” where he worked with students to set goals, look at options, and determine actions. He described this process as not being directive, stating, “It’s me asking questions to get them thinking about their own solutions because they know their lives. They know their challenges better than I do.” Cam described their PCP efforts as the program being highly individualized for each student:

I always tell students we have all of these different things that we can cover. So, the executive function, the social skills, the life skills, the career skills, but it looks different for each student. So, if there are certain things that students are already doing independently of us, we don't focus on those things. We want to meet the students where they are and support them where they need help. So, we don't have a manual that we work through or anything like that. It looks very different for each student that's in the program.

Aaliyah and Maggie also emphasized that PCP was the backbone of their programs. Maggie conceptualized this by stating, “Every student, no matter what level of the program they're at, gets that person-centered one-on-one support, where they meet with their... mentor for at least an hour a week and help with whatever goals they're moving towards.” Michael described their coaching model as being one-on-one, covering things related to students’ individual needs in the executive functioning, independent living, and social realms. Evan’s program staff held official PCP meetings with each individual student at the beginning of each

semester, then spent the rest of the semester working on those goals with the students in one-on-one meetings.

Peer Mentoring Services and Supports. Peer mentoring was discussed by all but one interview participant and ranged from voluntary to paid, from former student participants to non-affiliated students, and from one graduate student who stayed in the program after earning their undergraduate degree to undergraduate peer mentors who facilitated almost the entire program. One model was described by Andy, where students who had been in the program for at least one academic year were eligible to become paid peer mentors. These students were still active in the program and received all the benefits, but they also got paid to mentor younger students. Aaliyah's peer mentoring model was similar to Andy's, but their mentors were in the program for at least two years before becoming eligible, and they were not paid. Another distinction between these programs was that Aaliyah's program also used students who were not a part of the program but were in a service learning course at the institution or were already employed as a student worker with the program. Aaliyah shared that the peer mentoring piece was extremely valuable to their program, particularly when it came to the social aspect:

The mentors are... very interested in helping our students, not just build a friendship with them, but to expand their social network on campus. You know, I can do a lot with students in my meetings, we can do a lot of planning, but when it comes to the socialization part, we can talk about social situations. But, you know, I'm an adult, right? I'm not a peer. So, I think the peer-level connection has allowed students to have just such a great college experience. I think we would really be missing a lot if we didn't have that.

Maggie's program primarily utilized GAs as peer mentors, with a preference for those who completed their undergraduate degree at the institution. These GAs facilitated programming,

accompanied students to events on campus, and conducted one-on-one PCP meetings with the students.

The model used by Cam's program was unique compared to the other programs, as it utilized undergraduate volunteers to serve as peer mentors and PCP providers. As Cam described it, the peer mentors were the ones who "[covered] the three major areas... executive functioning, academic organization supports, and socialization... [they helped] students work towards their personal social goals... daily living, and career-building skills." Most mentors were upperclassmen, although they have used second year (sophomore) students in the past. While they did not receive payment for their services, they had the option to enroll in a for-credit experiential learning course that was created by the program director and accompanied the mentor role. The peer mentors for this program were each assigned only one student who was near to them in age and did not have more complex support needs. In those cases, one of the program staff would meet with the student. The peer mentors were expected to help with activities; they were not responsible for planning and implementing the schedule, facilitating off-campus activities, or guiding program-specific social activities.

Dedicated Program Space. Two of the interview participants discussed the importance of having a specific, dedicated program space for their students. As Michael put it,

Having that space on campus has been really awesome because it's not only a study space for them, but it's a place where I can come socialize with them throughout the week and support them, even if we don't have one-on-one meetings.

Maggie echoed Michael's sentiments, describing a sensory and distraction-reduced study space that also serves as a space for students to feel safe and comfortable, as well as receive support. She described it as "there's always a mentor on duty who can help answer questions about

homework assignments, look over things, or just be there to talk with someone about things. But really, it's mostly used for body doubling.” Related to their dedicated program spaces, Maggie’s and Michael’s students also had access to separate sensory rooms that could be used by their students when they got overstimulated and needed a safe space to take a break and self-regulate.

Social Services and Supports. All six interview participants indicated that their programs provided assistance related to the social arena. These services and supports tended to fall within one of three subcategories: activities, campus involvement, and skills development.

The activities described by the interview participants were very similar across programs. Common activities included in-house opportunities such as game, movie, trivia, and craft nights, as well as external opportunities such as bowling, sporting events, campus events, mini-golf, and visiting local attractions. Nearly all activities across the board involved food in some capacity. Two of the programs hosted at least one activity per week, another two held one larger event each month, and the other two had a specific number of activities each semester, but they were scheduled more sporadically. As Cam put it, the social activities were beneficial in that they “touch on the students’ varied interests and [give] them a chance to get to know each other.”

Andy and Maggie reported that they helped interested students find ways to get involved on campus, though they did not include campus involvement as a program expectation. They described helping students navigate their institution’s database of registered student organizations to find an organization that fits their interests. Andy also indicated that the program’s peer mentors were encouraged to invite their mentees to events on campus that aligned with their interests.

None of the programs provided direct skills instruction or forced social situations. As Maggie put it,

Some of our students feel a little bit a little bit weird about being forced into social situations with other students with autism. They've been, I don't use the word traumatized lightly. Some of them have been absolutely traumatized by being forced into support groups and different facets of special education in K-12, where now that they're here at college, even though they're in a support program, they feel some sort of way about being forced into hanging out with other students.

Instead, programs focused on creating opportunities for their students to develop their social skills more organically but in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. Maggie's program generated these opportunities through group mealtimes. Every weekday, one of the GAs reserved a table in the dining hall at breakfast, lunch, and dinner for program participants to join if they were so inclined. That way, she said, the students were free to attend when they felt up to it, and the timing was convenient for them. Per Maggie, "That is our most attended event because it's just a time to come out and do something you're already planning to do during the day but knowing that you'll have other people to eat with." In addition to securing the space, the GA was there to facilitate conversation among the students. As Maggie described, "That's really the main thing... making sure that everyone is... comfortable and included with what's being discussed... It's just a time to come out and spend time with other people in a space where someone [can] facilitate that conversation."

Evan's program hosted weekly one-hour chat times for students to develop social skills in a safe and comfortable environment. Every other week, they did a structured activity during the chat, with an agenda and a set plan, such as a creative arts activity, an adulting workshop, or a guest speaker. On the off weeks, they had open, unstructured chats, where they provided question cards as prompts or just let the students interact organically. Finally, Aaliyah's program

had small discussion/activity groups that students could join based on their interests. For example, this semester, they had a Dungeons and Dragons group, a relationship group, and a board game group, to name a few.

Workshops and/or Program-Specific Courses. Three of the interview participants discussed workshops and/or program-specific courses. The topics of these workshops/courses tended to be similar and aligned with the goals of the program. Maggie's program offered at least one workshop per week. Workshops were chosen and facilitated by the GAs. While they had done workshops that were purely for fun, most of their workshops catered toward the program priorities of academic support, career development, executive functioning, independent living, and social skills development. Examples that were given included "speed friending, like speed dating but for making friends," a career interest inventory, finding an internship, doing your own laundry, and budgeting. They also did a "member spotlight" series, where each program participant was able to share something they enjoyed doing.

Michael's program did not directly provide workshops. However, through collaboration with the institution's success coaches, students were encouraged and incentivized (with food) to attend workshops hosted by the success coaches. Some of the topics covered in these workshops included academic, study, and personal skills, time management, and exam preparation.

Finally, Aaliyah's program conducted required weekly one-hour, non-credit-bearing skills courses for first- and second-year students. The first-year student course was called "College Success" and covered the things that no one talked about but were vital to success, such as what campus supports there were and how to access them, note-taking strategies, life skills, time management, sleep management, and stress management. Second-year students took a career readiness course that promoted thoughts and actions regarding major and career choices,

interview skills, and networking. The desired course outcome was that students would be prepared and ready to apply for jobs and internships.

Program Expectations. Program expectations comprised the second theme for RQ1. Regarding program expectations, two participants indicated that they had none (interestingly, those were the same two programs that did not charge a program fee or have a program-specific application). Those participants had similar reasoning for not initiating program expectations, stated by one participant as “[their] institution is very small and rigorous, and so [they] didn’t want to put undue burden on [the students]; [they] just wanted to offer things.”

Three of the remaining participants discussed program expectations largely related to one-on-one meetings, activity participation, workshop/course attendance, employment experience, and study hall hours. The general consensus among the interview participants was that program expectations tended to encompass macro-level expectations; in other words, students were expected to spend a certain amount of time each week or engage with a set number of program offerings over the course of the semester, but they could, for the most part, pick and choose among offerings to meet those expectations. Along those lines, Evan made sure to emphasize that while they did have their students sign an “expectations contract” at the beginning of each semester that laid out the overall expectations for participation and effort, they tried not to make specific activities mandatory because “it is person-centered and because we know that each person is on their own journey.” For example, each participant was expected to gain work experience over the course of their time in the program, but the students were able to decide what that looked like: whether the student engaged in at least one volunteer experience per semester, a summer job, or an internship, they would meet that expectation as long as they were actively getting experience.

It should be noted that all three participants specifically stated that these are expectations, not enforceable requirements. As Cam put it, “If a student doesn't meet the requirement, it's not like we kick them out of the program or anything... It's still phrased as a requirement, but again, we're not kicking anyone out if they don't meet those requirements.” Maggie similarly stated, “We're a little bit lenient with it, so there are rules, but there's also an exception to every rule because it's, you know, person-centered one-on-one support.”

The participants who discussed program expectations in their interviews also offered multiple levels of support for program participants, with each level having its own set of expectations. The number of levels ranged from two to four and were graduated (i.e., initial supports were the most intensive and decreased from there based on student need). Across those programs, the majority of students were in the first tier (highest support levels) and had the most rigorous expectations for program participation. In general, students became eligible to move into a lesser tier of support after their first year in the program, decided on a case-by-case basis.

Tier 1 students in Evan's program were expected to attend two direct one-on-one check-ins, at least one additional program-sponsored event, and two study hall check-ins per week. Tier 2 students attended either one direct check-in and one program activity or two direct check-ins per week, and Tier 3 students attended one direct or indirect check-in per week. Tier 1 students in Cam's program were expected to attend two one-on-one meetings per week, 40 study hall hours per semester, and at least five program activities, while Tier 2 students were expected to attend one direct one-on-one check-in per week and had no study hall or social activity expectations, though those were still available to students in that tier. Finally, Tier 1 students in Maggie's program were expected to spend at least six hours per week with the program: an hour-long one-on-one meeting, two hours of social activities, and three hours of academics (i.e., study

hall, tutoring). Tier 2 students were expected to attend their weekly one-on-one meeting as well as two hours of social and/or academic activities each week, depending on their individual needs. Lastly, Tier 3 students were expected to meet one-on-one with their mentor either half an hour every week or one hour every other week for career development support.

Funding Sources. The third theme for RQ1 was sources of funding. As previously mentioned, the number of programs that received institutional funds was vastly different from the survey to the interviews; 17 of the 39 survey participants (43.6%) indicated that they received institutional funds, whereas only one out of the six interview participants (16.7%) indicated the same. The participants whose programs did not receive institutional funding expressed frustration with the lack of support from the institution and consistently listed that as a barrier to providing services. Among interview participants, the most common source of funding was program fees (four programs), followed by vocational rehabilitation funds and grants (three programs each), donations (two programs), and institutional funds (one program). All but one of these programs had multiple funding sources.

Program fees per semester for the participants' programs that charged them ranged from (1) \$500 (Tier 3 supports)/\$1,500 (Tier 2 supports)/\$3,000 (Tier 1 supports), to (2) \$2,200 (Tier 2 supports)/\$3,600 (Tier 1 supports), to (3) \$4,000 (regardless of support level), to (4) \$5,750 (also regardless of support level). Programs 1, 3, and 4 all had contracts with their respective vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs to pay for some or all the fees for eligible students in addition to a private pay option; all these programs had a mix of VR and private pay students. Program 2 only offered a private pay option, but they have also written grants to help keep fees down. They were planning, however, to increase the fees to \$2,400 per semester for Tier 2

supports and \$4,000 per semester for Tier 1 supports. This was reportedly the first fee increase the program had made since 2013.

The one interview participant whose program received institutional funds also received grant funding and was one of the two free programs. When asked whether they foresaw charging a fee in the future, the participant responded:

I floated the idea a couple of times, mostly from an engagement perspective. You know, we want to motivate the students to be involved and actually use the supports that we're giving them. But the more I think about it, the more I don't want to do that, just for that reason. So, I think the only reason we ever would is if our funding, like our budget, got cut a little bit more because we're dealing with some of that right now, but right now, there's no plans to ever charge for anything.

The other free program's operating budget came solely from a donor fund, to which only one family donated every few years. This participant did not intend to implement a program fee either and planned to apply for grant funding as their donor funds ran out.

Research Question Two

The second research question (RQ2), "How do ASP administrators at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S. decide which services to provide, and what informs their decision-making process?" was answered qualitatively through semi-structured interview questions. Themes included decision-making processes, collaboration with stakeholders, and barriers to providing services.

Decision-Making Processes

The decision-making processes varied for the interview participants and encompassed several subthemes. In addition to discussing the decision-makers themselves, participants

discussed the data sources from which they drew to inform their programmatic decisions. These included feedback from students and their parents; national professional organizations such as the College Autism Network (CAN) and the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD); other ASPs; partnerships with VR; and the literature.

Decision-Makers. One participant stated that their boss was the sole decision-maker and any ideas that they generated must have been approved by the boss, mostly for budgetary purposes. Outside of that, four participants reported a group decision-making process involving all program staff. Evan described the process as being “really all of us, our admin staff, our students, our graduate assistants, our coordinators, and our director, we all sit down and discuss.” None of the participants indicated that they had received institutional interference. As Aaliyah stated, “We kind of have the autonomy to choose if we would like to do that pretty easily.” Two of these participants, Cam and Maggie, also shared that they had external advisory boards that held them accountable. Cam explained the relationship between the program staff and their advisory board’s role in the decision-making process as:

Yeah, so it would probably start with our in-house staff: myself, our assistant coordinator, and our [specialist]; we have an office assistant as well. It probably starts there, and then we have an advisory board that meets annually. Typically, in February, we'll have a meeting that consists of a variety of different people. So, some are other people on campus, other professors who do work related to autism, some of our grad students who work with us, a representative from our [DRC], and a representative from Student Conduct here on campus. So, kind of hitting some of the key partnerships that we have... A local clinical psychologist and a parent of a former student. Yeah, there's a variety of different people on

the advisory board. So, any changes that we make would have to be approved by them as well.

Maggie shared that their advisory board was a new addition that academic year and described that decision-making relationship as:

It's mostly me and the assistant director. Last semester, there was an [advisory board] ... a group of mostly upper-class students, really involved students. They were also voted into their [advisory board] positions by other students in the program, and they helped plan activities and parties and things but also told us what they think is working and what's not working. But really what it comes down to is me and... the assistant director, deciding what was attended, what wasn't attended.

Direct and Indirect Feedback. All participants actively sought direct and indirect feedback from their stakeholders, predominantly their students, as well as the students' parents, to some extent. All participants engaged in direct *a posteriori* feedback collection from their students, primarily through end-of-semester surveys. As indicated by the interview responses, the essence of the surveys was fairly consistent across programs, with each asking questions that were essentially "What do you like? What do you not like? What was helpful? What was not helpful?" as well as questions designed to elicit feedback on the student's assigned program coach/mentor. Some participants administered *a priori* surveys to determine the sorts of programming their students wanted to engage with that semester. Direct parent feedback was primarily sought at the end of the semester via survey as well, though one program shared that they conducted end-of-semester meetings with the program staff/mentor, the student, and their parents.

Participants also described attaining direct feedback through informal channels, such as verbal conversations and presentations. As Evan phrased it, “We can present things. We present everything. We present resources, ideas. We ask them for ideas.” Andy also emphasized using presentations to elicit feedback about potential program offerings:

I also ideated with my colleagues, “What are your thoughts?” And then once we had sort of a prototype, I presented it to the students who are currently involved with the program and said, “This is what we're thinking. What do you think about all these things? What do you like about it? What do you not like about it? What would you add? What would you change?” I got their feedback and then fine-tuned what we're doing from there.

Maggie stated, “We try and do at least the verbal feedback, if not written or online, for things like the workshops, what students liked about the workshop, if they would want to attend something like it again.” Aaliyah indicated that she and her colleagues also relied a lot on verbal feedback, particularly from the families of their students, when she stated, “We meet a lot with families, particularly towards the end of the semester, so we get a lot of verbal feedback. We're asking people for feedback, they're most likely to give it.”

The participants also discussed ways in which they collected indirect feedback from their students to inform programming and practice. One key method was through observation of engagement and participation in program activities. Maggie described this as:

If students come and they're engaged, even if it's only one or two, we view that as beneficial. And then the things that no one comes to, we take off our calendar. We talk about maybe what we could have done better. Why did no one attend those sorts of things and try and cater it to student needs.

Evan shared that she and her colleagues used observation of students' behaviors and interactions to help them find where there may be gaps that should be addressed. She also indicated that they reviewed students' progress notes at the end of the semester to assess how they performed as compared to their stated goals. Finally, she reported that they were working internally to create their own success metrics that they could use to assess program effectiveness throughout the semester.

Involvement with National Professional Organizations. Five out of the six participants mentioned national professional organizations as a resource for ideas, advice, and common practices. Andy referenced attending an AHEAD conference, where he interacted with other autism support professionals about what they were doing in their programs and why. Maggie also reported having attended an AHEAD conference. She described it as being helpful, but it depended on the speakers and workshops that were offered because they were typically geared more toward disability services in general, rather than autism specifically. All five of these participants, including Andy, independently brought up the CAN. When asked which conference was more beneficial, the AHEAD conference or the CAN conference (the College Autism Summit), Maggie replied, "Oh, the [College Autism] Summit, absolutely. We came back with so many ideas and hopes and conversations... I attended it with my assistant director, and the whole time, we were just taking notes about better ways to support students." She further went on to say, "But I just know, [college ASPs] are specifically what the Summit is about and for and by, and I made a lot of good connections with that... From that specific perspective, [the Summit] was a lot more beneficial."

The CAN seemed to be a large factor in participants' decision-making processes. When he was first starting in his role, Andy referenced the CAN's list of ASPs to research what other

programs were doing in terms of fees, activities, and programming as a resource in determining what his institution's program would look like. Aaliyah used the CAN to ensure that her program staff were staying current with what other programs were doing. Evan and Cam each mentioned the CAN monthly meetings for ASP directors as a good resource for advice from peers. Cam specifically shared:

I have become very heavily involved with the College Autism Network... I have a close connection with a lot of other program directors, and we have monthly meetings. And I think, hearing what other programs are doing and tackling, or hearing... [or] how other programs are tackling certain issues, I think also helps to refine or change [our] services as well.

Other Autism Support Programs. The same participants who discussed the CAN further went on to indicate that they used CAN's resources to benchmark what other institutions were doing within their ASPs. As reported in the above section, Evan and Cam used the CAN monthly meetings for ASP directors as a resource for discovering what other ASPs were doing. Evan stated, "We're also part of CAN, and they're often passing around like, 'Hey, how do you manage this?' So, we're in these meetings, collaborating and talking about different programs that are coming through, or different curriculum, things, funding, all that." Andy described his process as "[spending] a lot of time researching what other schools were doing... I went through [the CAN's database of ASPs], and I made a spreadsheet to see what everyone's doing, what they're charging, what they're, you know, programming and things like that." Finally, Aaliyah made a statement that summarized what other participants said about looking to other ASPs for guidance: "I think that we've always tried to mirror what other autism programs have been doing."

Partnerships with Vocational Rehabilitation. Three of the participants referenced contracts with their state's VR departments to provide funding for eligible students. Because of these partnerships, the participants who had them were beholden to the expectations and requirements of their contracts. As Evan put it, all but two of their students were funded by VR, so "Because [VR] is our primary stakeholder right now, we make sure that everything follows our contract, and we make sure that if that's set, then we're good." Aaliyah described the expectations of this relationship as solidifying what they were already doing as a program:

Fortunately, the way the program is set up aligns very well with [VR]. So, in the past few years, they have started providing funding... the way that they have set up what the student would need to participate in actually matches completely what we've been doing for years. The only thing that we did have to change with being in compliance with [VR] is that previously, we required one hour of study hall, but [VR] says the student has to do a minimum of two hours of study hall. So, we changed that for all students in the program, regardless of funding from [VR], as it doesn't hurt anyone to do an extra hour of study hall. But that's really where we'll stay consistent, is that if it falls in line with the [VR] funding, then that's kind of where we are.

Review of the Literature. Though not as widespread as direct/indirect feedback or using the CAN's resources, a few of the participants acknowledged using the existing literature base in their decision-making process. Maggie and Michael both described regularly conducting their own reviews of the literature. Maggie reported, "I spend most of my off time updating myself and my knowledge of what's going on and what other programs are doing. The research that's out there... says students need more support, and it's what we see in [our] students." Michael echoed

this by stating, “Honestly, my personal research on it has been a big factor, just... reading the other research that shows what has been working.”

Evan and Aaliyah indicated that they relied on research faculty at their respective institutions for literature updates. As Aaliyah put it, “I’m not as much of a researcher, but we have someone here at the center who is really keeping us up to date with what’s being published and what is being put out there to really inform our work.” Evan similarly reported, “We have faculty members in our department... that do autism-specific work, and then we’ll ask them about ‘what does this look like for neurodiversity, from a neurodiversity framework?’ and overlay the information [to what we are doing].”

Collaboration with Stakeholders

Participants described collaboration efforts with various entities across campus and with the parents of students they serve.

Collaboration with Campus Stakeholders. Participants discussed collaborations with many entities across campus, including career services, disability services, faculty, the housing department, and tutoring centers.

Career Services. While most interview participants referenced career services in some respect (i.e., attending career fairs with students, referring students to career services for assistance, facilitating related workshops), Maggie provided a thorough description of her program’s collaboration with this department. One of the things that Maggie’s program really focused on with the career center was their Career Certificate program. The students in her program were expected to complete the Career Certificate requirements, which were to attend career development workshops, create and refine their resumes, and meet with a career counselor. Maggie emphasized the value of this collaboration, stating, “So that’s not ours taken

out of our schedule; it's something that is already offered here, but we do kind of cater to it as part of their program [expectations].”

Another way in which Maggie’s program collaborated with the career center was by working with one of their Assistant Directors at least once per academic year to facilitate an external site visit to a nearby business that was open and affirming towards things like neurodiverse employment initiatives, employee accommodations, and employee resource groups for those with disabilities. On those visits, students were able to interact with representatives from HR, company leadership, information technology, and other relevant departments to the students’ interests. An important thing about these visits, as Maggie explained, was that the program and their career center worked together to arrange visits to companies that met the interests and goals of their current students rather than to places of convenience.

Disability Services. Three of the six interview participants held dual roles in the campus disability services office (DSO), which automatically garnered collaboration between the two. The participants who were not affiliated with the campus DSO described positive relationships between their respective departments. None of the participants indicated that their students were required to register for accommodations with the DSO, though the consensus was that most students did. Two of the participants who functioned independently of the DSO discussed coordinating with the DSO to ensure that their students’ needs were met. As Cam described it,

We have a really good relationship with our Office of Disability Services here, so we do want the students to [take] the initiative there, but we would help them. We'd say... ‘We know there's an accommodation that might be helpful for you, so let's schedule a meeting with your caseworker, and let's have that discussion.’

Campus Housing. Two interview participants brought up collaboration with their respective housing departments. Cam discussed this relationship within the context of accommodations, specifically, an accommodation to live on campus after their first year. As Cam put it, “After that, it can be hard to acquire [campus] housing. But [Housing] considers it... a medical necessity [for our students] to live on campus if they want... so our students can stay on campus as long as they like.” Maggie discussed their collaboration with the housing department in relation to their support for students in the program and neurodivergent students in general. Housing agreed to install a sensory room in the basement of a residence hall they were renovating at the time to support neurodivergent students; they provided the furnishings for the room and gave access control to the ASP. All the students in Maggie’s program were given access, and any student outside of the program who expressed a need was also able to be given access.

Professional Programs. Aaliyah shared that her program had partnered with the Occupational Therapy department (OT) to supervise one or two senior OT capstone students whose goal was to create, run, and collect data on a group program designed to benefit the students in the ASP. These groups typically ran for seven weeks, with the OT students collecting pre- and post-data. The examples Aaliyah shared for these programs were time management and problem-solving groups.

Tutoring Resources. Many of the interview participants referenced subject-specific tutoring as outside the scope of their respective programs. Though not much detail was given by any of the participants, all of them indicated that they worked with the tutoring resources on their campuses to connect their students to the appropriate persons to assist them with subject-specific tutoring.

Collaboration with Students' Parents. Two interview participants, Aaliyah and Cam, detailed collaboration efforts with their students' parents. Aaliyah explained that they had periodic check-ins throughout the semester with each student and their parent(s) to ensure that everyone was on the same page and providing consistent support for the student. Cam's program conducted weekly check-ins between the peer mentor, the student, and their parent(s). As she described it, this practice was not only to keep parents apprised of what was happening with their students but also to support students' independence:

There is weekly parent contact that is with the student and the mentor. Typically, it's a phone call, or it can be an email. It's just based on what the students and the parents decide. Some weeks, it's a phone call; some weeks, it's an email if the parents have a conflict. But it's really designed to keep the parents in the loop, so they're not bombarding the students with a bunch of questions. So, we set this up intentionally so it's one time when parents can get all their questions answered. It's keeping them in the loop, but the students are still very much taking the lead as far as what is shared with the parents. So, we do make it clear to students that anything academic, like anything grade-wise, we can't hide from parents because they're typically the ones funding the program, but we let the students know as far as... anything going on in their social lives or in therapy that the students take the lead, as far as what they feel comfortable sharing with their parents.

In addition to the weekly check-ins, Cam would conduct end-of-semester meetings with the mentor, the student, and at least one parent to assess the student's progress and decide what the program would look like for that student moving forward.

Barriers to Providing Services

Interview participants shared various barriers they had encountered throughout their time with their respective programs. These included external and institutional barriers, a lack of student engagement and staffing, and concerns regarding funding and space.

External Barriers. Two interview participants indicated that external factors may have been creating barriers to them serving students, both directly and indirectly. Cam shared that their enrollment had been down since the pandemic. Though she did not have an explanation for this trend, she had a few theories, including that maybe they had garnered a bit of a reputation for being hard to get into; there were a lot of other programs cropping up that were giving people a wider range of options; and/or current state legislation may have been discouraging people from moving to her state. Similar to one of Cam's concerns, Evan shared that state legislation aimed at removing all diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs had limited their ability to educate the community on behalf of their students and reduced the number and variety of resources available to students on campus.

Institutional Barriers. Overall, interview participants noted a lack of institutional barriers. In fact, Maggie had many positive things to say about the institutional support her program had received. Michael, however, did share that while there were no overt institutional barriers, a lack of understanding and passion from upper administration for the work that their program does had created some dissonance between the two. They expressed that this had led to unrealistic expectations from the president of the institution:

Our president thinks that just because [a student] is a National Merit Scholar and they have autism, they're just going to show up at my door and end up in our program and/or end up in one-on-one meetings with me... I know you can't make anybody do anything, but I think it would be nice if we had the support where if we had a struggling National Merit Scholar

who is also autistic, there are things set up for [their] success that are mandatory, like weekly meetings. If a student is on probation, I kind of wish that there was that support and respect towards my program and the meetings they have with me. And you know, those could be required for our students who are struggling because I've got more expertise than our success coaches are going to have.

Lack of Student Engagement. A fairly common barrier that the participants discussed was a lack of student engagement with the program. As Andy stated, “The biggest [problem] is engagement. You know, how do we get the students to buy in and actually take advantage of the supports that we're providing?” Unfortunately, none of the participants with whom I met had a solution for this conundrum. Cam went into more detail about a lack of student engagement as a barrier and the frustration that it brings:

I know from a program standpoint, one of the things that we can sometimes struggle with is a student who doesn't want support or is not invested in the services that we provide. We're limited in what we can do to help them, and so we do as much as we can, you know, in our application and interview process to try to get a feel for how much the student really wants this or how much is this the parent telling the student they need to do it? But I know that's definitely one of the biggest barriers we have is if we get a student in the program that doesn't want to be here, you know, isn't going to show up to meetings, isn't invested in the services, we're limited in what we can do to help.

Maggie shared similar sentiments to Cam and Andy, stating, “The biggest barriers are the students. If they're not motivated to be part of [an ASP], they're forced by their parents, or they don't know what [an ASP is], they don't get the support... they could benefit from.” She went on to further detail the impacts she had seen for students who were engaged in the program versus

those who weren't. Maggie shared that she collected and reviewed data regarding student success, most prominently evidenced through students' GPAs, at the end of each semester. She reported that the students who were not active in the program were almost always the ones who were not doing well academically. Conversely, she reported that "Students who get the support, are motivated, and are interested in being active do well. Do better. They complete more credits. They have higher GPAs, better retention, and better graduation rates." She summed up her thoughts regarding student engagement with, "If they're not engaged [with the program], then they don't get support... we don't view it as wasting our time, but they're definitely wasting their time and wasting someone's money, and they could be more successful."

Lack of Staffing. Insufficient staffing was a common barrier among the participants, with four of the six bringing it up in the interview. Aaliyah's program employed considerably more staff than the programs of the other participants and had a 1:10 staff-to-student ratio. She recognized this was a privilege while also acknowledging that more staff would allow her program to provide more services and/or support more students, stating, "I never want to complain that we don't have enough staff, but I think that the bandwidth of everyone is where it should be... We're always thinking of creative ways of utilizing interns, doctoral students, OT/PT, things like that."

Michael and Cam both lamented their lack of sufficient staffing. Michael indicated that, in addition to another full-time staff member, more peer mentors would be very beneficial to their program, as they had many more students than they had peer mentors to support them. At the time of the interview, Michael was the only full-time employee of the program, and they shared that it would be very helpful to have another full-time staff member with the same expertise as them helping to run the program, stating, "That [way,] we can get the students who

really need support from a mentor that has been through a degree before. It would be a lot easier to split that caseload and provide that [with another staff member].” Cam indicated that there was a need for additional full-time staff to support the program. However, because her program was entirely self-funded, without additional funding, an additional staff position would not be maintainable.

Maggie emphasized the positive difference that the addition of a full-time staff member had made for her program, stating, “Last Fall, we hired the assistant director. Before that, I was the only full-time... staff member, and I planned everything by myself. Having another staff member has made it possible to expand and do a lot more things.” She also noted the negative aspects of relying on GAs to supplement staffing needs in terms of student impact:

Some students really like their [assigned] mentor and want to work with them the whole time that they're available, which, unfortunately, for grad students, is usually only two years, sometimes three. I guess that's another barrier, right? You have to regularly transition the staff that works for us.

Concerns Regarding Funding. As is not unexpected in Academia, another common barrier discussed by participants was a lack of funding. Aaliyah shared that her program was fortunate in that the institution helped them to keep their fees down where possible (though the institution did not contribute financially to the program), and since partnering with VR to pay the program fees for eligible students, they had not had any substantial financial concerns. Before the partnership, the program would provide a full reduction in fees for students who needed the program but had significant financial barriers; occasionally, they would receive donor funds for scholarships, but often, they would not receive funding for those students, and they had no way to mitigate the financial loss. Despite their current financial security, Aaliyah indicated that she

was still concerned, stating, “It's not a guarantee that money is going to be there... that could change at any day, [with] administration changes and politics... I think [it] would become a barrier for us and our students if suddenly that [partnership] disappeared.”

One participant expressed frustration at their institution's lack of financial support, particularly because the institution's President and Provost used the program as a recruiting tool, stating, “We're one of the only universities that has a free program and all of that, but then we're not funded through the university, so they don't support us to keep it free.” They shared that financial support from the institution would allow the program to provide more community and real-world practice for their students by supporting the purchase and upkeep of a large passenger van. They explained that many of their students did not drive, and in-house transportation would provide opportunities for social and practical excursions such as off-campus activities and trips to the grocery store, respectively.

A few participants discussed funding in relation to staffing, which was also discussed more thoroughly in a previous subtheme. As Cam phrased it,

One of our biggest barriers would be staffing. In conjunction with that, we're completely self-sustaining from a fund standpoint, so we operate solely on the fees that families pay. So, we would have to generate the funds to create that staff position, which, where we are right now, would not be sustainable.

Concerns Regarding Space. Appropriate and sufficient space were concerns for two of the participants. Cam indicated that though the space allotment for her program was sufficient, in some ways, it was not the most appropriate space for their needs. For example, they shared a historic building that looked like a house with two other departments. Due to the age of the

building and its protected nature, they were limited in the ways they were allowed to adapt it to their needs, including making adjustments to make the space more sensory-friendly.

Maggie shared that her program did not have sufficient space to support more students. While full-time staff did carry a small caseload, the majority of the students in the program met one-on-one with GAs, who did not have their own office space. This created a need for spaces to host those meetings, and the program's current space had only one room fitting that need. As Maggie stated,

We can and have used other spaces on campus before, but it was a little weird because they're paying to be in this program. They're paying for the one-on-one meetings, and they should be able to meet with their mentor in a space that's designed for that, and not a random conference room on the third floor of the Student Union Building on the other side of campus.

In summation, Maggie shared, "Our program cap comes from space. If we had more space, our program could be bigger." The institution had not placed a cap on the number of students the program could serve. However, Maggie and her team capped it "because of what we provide and how we want it to be, how we want our spaces to look."

Research Question Three

The final research question (RQ3), "What practices have ASP administrators at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S. found to be most and least beneficial for program participants?" was also answered qualitatively through semi-structured interview questions. Themes for RQ3 centered on program effectiveness, including practices that participants had found to be beneficial and those that had proven less beneficial.

Program Effectiveness

The participants discussed practices and activities that they had found to be beneficial, appreciated, and/or used by their students, as well as those that garnered the opposite response.

Beneficial Practices. The practice that was mentioned by the majority of participants as being beneficial for their students was the individual meetings between the students and their mentors/coaches (official terms varied by program). Other beneficial practices included peer mentoring, social events, relationships with faculty, a dedicated program space, avenues for non-verbal communication, transparency in communication, and therapy.

Individual Meetings Between Student and Mentor/Coach. The interview participants consistently rated the individual meetings between the students and their mentors/coaches as one of, if not the most, beneficial aspects of their programs. Many of the participants described these meetings as a time to problem-solve with the students and help them stay on track. Aaliyah described the meetings as “the biggest anchor of the program.” Michael shared that they had seen “a significant growth and increase in GPAs with the individual coaching,” while Andy reported seeing “a lot of improvement in their skills, their communication, problem solving, and things like that. And especially the time management piece.” Additionally, Cam shared that “For a lot of the students who end up here, that's one of the things that draws them in is that we cater to their needs and where they need that support.” Maggie gave a description of how the individual meetings benefitted her students:

The one-on-one support is really the biggest part of our program. Every student, no matter what level of the program they're at, gets that person-centered one-on-one support, where they meet with their... mentor for at least an hour a week and help with whatever goals they're moving towards. We try to focus first on academics and executive functioning. Make sure that they understand their syllabi and their assignments and what they're being

asked, putting together a schedule to make sure that they're balancing everything, and they have time for themselves. They're working their [program] requirements into their schedules, those sorts of things, and then we try to add that social support.

Maggie also indicated that the individual meetings had helped her students improve their self-advocacy skills, stating, “We try and make sure that they get what they need, but it also comes down to telling us and sharing their actual needs.”

Peer Mentoring. Though five of the six participants discussed having a peer mentoring component within their programs, only Andy and Aaliyah mentioned it as one of their most beneficial practices. As Andy phrased it, “Peer mentors are the other most effective support because they meet every week throughout the year... I think students really like that someone's checking in on them... offering advice if they need it... that's been really special for them.”

Aaliyah shared a similar sentiment, saying, “I think the peer-level connection has allowed students to have just such a great college experience. I think we would really be missing a lot if we didn't have that.” She went on to further explain why having peer mentors for her students was such a vital component of her program:

It's always so great to see students who you come in; they didn't really have any friends in high school, or they didn't really have any social connections, and really be able to build relationships with peers. Has just been really great to see. The mentors are always extremely caring. They're very interested in helping our students, not just build friendships with them but to expand their social network on campus. You know, I can do a lot with students in my meetings we can do a lot of planning, but when it comes to the socialization part, we can talk about social situations. But, you know, I'm an adult, right? I'm not a peer.

Social Events. Maggie and Michael included social events among their most beneficial practices. Maggie shared that her students seemed to have found the off-campus excursions to be beneficial, explaining:

We are a residential campus, and the students only get to leave campus when their parents come to get them or during break times. It's nice sometimes to just be able to get away and connect with other students, connect with us as staff members because I think that's also an important part of participation, is getting to know the people that you're working with as your mentor and I try and be as engaged as I can so that they know who I am and who [the assistant director] is because I think if they have a positive relationship with us as the staff, then they'll view the program in a positive light.

Michael reported that they had noticed a significant improvement in students' social skills through their program's weekly events. They shared that these events had allowed the students to build a community and that community "doesn't just stop in that weekly event. They go and do other things on campus together [independently], like have lunch, have coffee, go to the movies, go to escape rooms, whatever the case may be." According to Michael, that evidence of friendship-building was why they continued to hold the weekly events and was one of the main reasons they continued to have the program, in general.

Relationships with Faculty. Aaliyah imparted that her program's relationship with the faculty at her institution had proven to be a significant benefit in allowing her to troubleshoot potential academic problems before they became insurmountable and helped her students stay on track. She shared that her institution sent out student progress surveys and had a system where faculty could raise a flag if they had concerns about a student, both of which she had access to for her students. She shared that she also proactively sent surveys to her students' instructors in

the third week of each semester to find out if there were any concerns about her students.

Aaliyah gave a real-life example of these systems directly benefitting a student:

I had a student a couple of years ago, a very smart student, who, at the week three survey, I got a message that he was failing the course and that he was missing all of these assignments. So, I reached out to the professor, and I was like, ‘This is really surprising.’ And she was like, ‘Yeah, I’m really surprised too. The assignments that he’s missing are these. He has to fill out an index card at the end of class and turn it in. It’s really simple. You just write a couple questions on it, you turn it in, and that’s how you get the points. But he hasn’t done any of them.’ So, I talked to the student. I was like, ‘What’s going on with these note cards?’ He was like, ‘Yeah, I don’t have any index cards. Like, I didn’t know where to buy them.’ And I was like, ‘Oh, okay, sure. I have a stack of them. They’re also at the bookstore.’ And he was like, ‘Oh, cool, yeah, that’s why I wasn’t doing them, because, like, I just, I don’t know. I didn’t know where to buy them, I didn’t know how to ask.’ So, we were able to problem solve together, but we were able to quickly get him back on track with the course because the professor was able to notify and it was such a simple thing, like, it wasn’t a big issue, but he was really not doing well in the class.

She finished her story by stating, “I’m not going to say there are never big issues, but sometimes there are small issues that could be easily solved if someone knew about them.”

Dedicated Program Space. As previously discussed in the results for RQ1, Michael mentioned their dedicated program space as a part of their program that was beneficial for their students. He described it as giving them “a space to not feel isolated and therefore promotes them doing better mentally, which connects to their academics. So, it’s great socially, but it also impacts them in so many different ways.”

Avenues for Non-Verbal Communication. Also mentioned by Michael as a beneficial practice was the use of a Discord server for students to communicate non-verbally with them and with each other. He indicated that this tool had allowed for greater student engagement because it allowed students who were not yet comfortable attending in-person events to connect and practice social skills with the other students in the program. As he described it, “Discord has been nice because... it's not just a general chat... there's so many different channels that they can talk on, and it's not just a messaging system, it's a real way to build a social community, even online.”

Transparency in Communication. Evan shared that one of the most beneficial practices her program engaged in was transparent communication. She explained that she viewed the program as a partnership between the program and the students. She expected that students would be equal participants in the process and, in exchange, program staff “agreed to show up to meetings on time or reschedule in a timely manner, or make sure that [students] know when [they’ve] achieved a goal, or [they] need to work on something different.” She further specified that students in her program knew what was expected of them in advance, but there was room for mistakes and growth.

She stressed that her program endeavored to lay a foundation of transparent communication from the beginning. To accomplish this, the program held a new student/parent orientation and a returning student orientation every academic year to set and reset expectations, respectively. Additionally, she indicated that at the beginning of each semester, every student and their assigned mentor/coach discussed and signed an expectations contract that asked for participation and honest communication from both sides.

Therapy. Finally, the participant whose program offered in-house therapy for their students cited this service as one of the most beneficial, stating:

Therapy has been huge, especially in the past couple of years. We have just seen a huge... we already had a lot of students in therapy, but I think even since the pandemic, we've seen just even more of an increase in the need for therapy services and the complexity of the therapy services needed. So, I think us offering that in-house is really, really helpful, and I know that's one of the things that is different between our program and a lot of other programs out there. So, we're fortunate to be able to do that. I would definitely say that's one of the most beneficial.

They went on to say that it had become the norm for students in their program to take advantage of the therapy services.

Less Beneficial Practices. The participants reported a variety of practices that did not work for their groups. Some less beneficial practices were shared by multiple participants (e.g., practices related to events, study hall, and social skills), while others were unique to that particular participant's program (e.g., practices related to peer mentoring, creating resources, wellness activities, and virtual events). However, many of the participants also shared ways in which they had modified a non-beneficial practice to make it more beneficial for their students.

Andy, Michael, and Evan discussed non-beneficial practices related to scheduling program events. For Andy, things did not work when he was the one doing the planning and scheduling. Though he did not have an explanation, in his second year with the program, the students stopped coming to events that he had planned for them. Andy adapted this practice to where some of the peer mentors (and former program participants) were in charge of the planning and scheduling of events. He reported that since making this change, student

engagement in events had increased, as had student satisfaction with events. Michael shared that not planning or advertising events in advance and not considering students' opinions proved to be non-beneficial for their program. Recognizing this as a problem, Michael began planning out the events for the whole semester in advance using the feedback and suggestions they received from the end-of-semester surveys. They then were able to create a regular schedule for posting information about each event on Instagram two days before the event occurred. Since shifting to a more structured, student-informed practice, they were able to increase attendance at their events and make them more beneficial for their students. Conversely, pre-planning the events for the semester was not beneficial for Evan's program; doing so resulted in the majority of events being devoid of student participation. To remedy this, Evan and her team decided to distribute a survey at the beginning of each semester to assess students' interest in various topics and events, including space for them to write responses that were not listed. From there, they were able to host the highest-rated events and increase student attendance.

Andy also discussed their proctored study halls as being unbeneficial for his students because they did not come to them, stating, "Students... in the program almost never use the study hall... we have it proctored, we have it manned, but for some reason, we can't get people to actually show up for those, so I'm workshopping ways to make that happen." As evidenced by his quote, however, he had not successfully modified this practice to increase attendance. Cam mentioned that her students had reported that study hall was their least favorite part of the program and that it could be a struggle to get the students to attend regularly. To increase agency in her students and make it less burdensome for them, Cam shifted the program's study hall requirement from a certain number of hours every week to a cumulative 40 hours over the course of the semester. Lastly, Maggie also discussed study hall in relation to practices that had not been

beneficial for her students. She shared that before her program procured the designated program space, they used to offer proctored study hall in the evenings for one to two-hour increments in the library and later virtually as well (post-COVID). They stopped offering evening study hall hours as an option when they received the program space and had it open and staffed throughout the day; hosting evening study hall hours became burdensome for the staff, and the students weren't attending.

As discussed under “Services and Supports” in the results for RQ1, Maggie’s program did not provide social skills training or engage in forced social situations. She found that these practices were often triggering for some of her students and thus very unbeneficial. Instead, her program offered a wide variety of options for students to engage in social activities, and she allowed the students to determine when and what they were comfortable with regarding socializing. Cam also described a social skills-related practice that she had found to be unbeneficial for the students in her program:

We used to do what we called group meetings, which were like, I think they met every other week, and they were social skills oriented. We would pick a topic and kind of address that, and then, largely based on feedback from students and parents, they didn't love those, and so they liked just being able to socialize with the other students.

Cam indicated that they moved away from hosting social skills group meetings and towards general social activities because of the negative feedback they received. She shared that they had received much more positive feedback since making that change.

The participant whose program included a supported residence hall shared a practice unique to their program that had proven unbeneficial and was subsequently modified. When the supported residence hall was established, they partnered with the institution’s occupational

therapy program (OT) to recruit undergraduate OT students as peer mentors for the students living in the program's residence hall. The participant described it as:

We had OT students who were paired with a student living in the house, and their goal was to identify skills that the student wanted to build and then work on building those skills together. It didn't really work out great. I think that this population is unique and... I think that the OT students might have been more used to a higher support need population... It's not always easy, especially when you're in a similar age bracket. So, the students weren't really thrilled about it. They were kind of like, 'Why is this person making me do stuff? I don't know if I need to do that.' And I [responded], 'Yeah, this wasn't what I intended.' I wanted it to be more of a peer mentor situation. Thinking that a person who has knowledge of OT might help [the students] figure out how to take the bus to the mall, or [they] could cook a meal together. But it apparently didn't turn out like that, so we put a pause on that specific involvement from OT.

The participant's program still maintained a partnership with the OT program, but in such a way that there were fewer OT students involved, and they were older than most of the students in the ASP. The participant followed up with, "I'm sure there's other stuff over the years that we've tried, but the students gave some good feedback, and we took that and decided not to do it anymore."

Evan shared that she used to create resources based on her students' perceived needs rather than their self-identified needs. As she described it:

So, we get really excited when we have a student in lots of different realms where we'll say, 'Oh, I think this is going to be really awesome for the student. This is EBP, we need to go ahead and set this up,' and we spend this time developing something, whether that be

a visual or program or what have you, an event, and the students don't show up. So, we now take a collaborative approach. 'Okay, so if you need a visual, we're gonna make it when you're in your meeting so that you're also taking part of this process,' really putting it back to what does the student want? What does the student need? So that we are truly keeping it student-centered, but we're also not spending time on things that our students are like, 'Oh, well, I figured that out, I don't need a visual for that,' or 'I don't need to learn how to do that. I've already done that.' So, it's really keeping them in that process of planning.

Essentially, she learned to share her excitement over a new practice, opportunity, etc., with her students first and get their buy-in before rushing to implement anything new.

Finally, Maggie discussed two more practices that she had found to be unbeneficial for her students: meeting students at the on-campus gym and virtual events. She shared that the program's GAs used to meet students in the gym each week for an hour to encourage students who did not typically engage in physical activity to do so. When the practice began, students would come and participate in activities such as pool or ping-pong, but by the last semester it was offered, only one student was coming, and they came every day on their own, regardless, so the practice was no longer fulfilling its purpose. At that point, Maggie indicated that she asked herself, "Should students be spending time in the gym? Probably. But what can we do to bring them together and make them more active?" In response, she began a weekly walking group, where she and the students left campus and walked around the town in which the institution was located. Per Maggie, this practice achieved the goal of providing a wellness activity that encouraged students to engage in physical activity and was well-attended.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Maggie's program went entirely virtual for the first semester and offered a hybrid format for the second. Since then, the program has ceased virtual and hybrid activities because, as Maggie put it, "There's definitely a difference in engagement and attendance in person [versus virtual]. We try to do more of that in person. It just feels a little bit different, too." She did share that they would consider offering a virtual option for an in-person event if a commuter student requested it because they were dependent on their parents for transportation and, as such, were unable to attend in person. She further shared that she could remember only one time that had happened. For the most part, however, they only offered in-person activities.

Summary of Results

Fifty-two program administrators responded to the survey, but only 39 completed it, with 36 of those declining to answer at least one question. I interviewed six program administrators. These participants hailed from the Northeast, Southeast, and Southwest regions of the U.S. and were aged 31-39. Pronoun preferences included four for she/her, one for he/him, and one for they/them. Three participants identified as neurodivergent.

Research Question One

Findings for RQ1 were derived from both the survey and the interviews. Data from the survey indicated that slightly more than half of the institutions with ASPs were private, had been in existence for over five years, and served more than 30 students. The students served by these ASPs were predominantly White, male, and aged 18-23. The most common admissions requirements were proof of admission to the institution and an interview, while the least common requirements were a picture, video essay, minimum GPA, and letters of recommendation. Respondents largely indicated providing executive functioning coaching, individual meetings,

person-centered planning, and social activities, while academic accommodations, alternate testing sites, subject-specific tutoring, and mental health support were offered by other departments within the institution. The majority of programs offered tiered supports and were funded mainly by program fees, followed by institutional funds, grants, and vocational rehabilitation. The most frequently used success metrics, as indicated by the survey results, were student satisfaction, graduation rates, and retention rates.

Responses given by the interview participants diverged from the survey data in the areas of direct ASP offerings, including executive functioning coaching, independent living skills development/instruction, proctored study halls, social skills instruction, and a summer transition program, with interview participants endorsing these supports at higher rates than survey respondents. Additionally, more survey respondents endorsed receiving institutional funds than did the interview participants.

Interview participants elaborated on their survey responses, providing context around key services and supports provided by their programs in the areas of academic supports, career development, independent living, mental health, person-centered planning, peer mentoring, social supports, and program-specific workshops/courses. In addition, they shared their program expectations for participating students and elaborated on their sources of funding.

Research Question Two

Findings for RQ2 were born entirely out of the interviews and concerned decision-making processes, collaboration with stakeholders, and barriers to providing services. Decisions were made through both top-down and collaborative models and were based predominantly on stakeholder feedback, involvement in national professional organizations, other programs, partnership requirements with VR, and the literature. Interview participants described

collaborating with various stakeholder groups, such as campus partners (e.g., career services, disability services, campus housing, professional programs, and tutoring resources), advisory boards, and the parents of their students. Barriers faced by the interview participants included external factors such as DEI-related legislation, institutional factors such as a lack of funding, space, and support from institutional administration, and program-level factors such as student engagement and staffing shortages.

Research Question Three

Findings for RQ3 also came solely from interview responses and concerned program effectiveness, namely most and least beneficial practices. The most beneficial practices described by interview participants were one-on-one meetings between each student and their mentor/coach, peer mentoring, social events, faculty relationships, a dedicated program space, options for non-verbal communication and engagement, and therapy services (where available). The least beneficial practices shared by participants were poorly planned and advertised events, practices designed and implemented without student input, rigid social skills training, and virtual events. Proctored study halls were also discussed as being unpopular but still required. Participants also shared the ways in which they had adapted unbeneficial practices to better meet the needs of the students.

This chapter presented the findings from both the survey and interview data to capture the landscape of ASPs at four-year universities in the U.S. while also highlighting how the two methodologies complemented and diverged from one another. The survey results provided a wealth of information regarding general descriptives of ASPs and what they are doing to support their students, while the semi-structured interviews provided more context around why and how ASPs are supporting their students. The interview responses expanded upon the survey results to

provide the rationale and emotion behind program choices and highlighted decision-making strategies that were missing from the survey data. The use of both methodologies added richness and depth to the data that neither a survey nor interviews alone could have achieved.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This study explored (a) the supports currently being provided by autism support programs (ASPs) at four-year postsecondary institutions in the United States and how those supports align with and diverge from autistic college students' areas of need as identified by a review of the literature, (b) how ASP administrators make decisions regarding which services to offer and what informs those decisions, and (c) beneficial and less beneficial program practices as perceived by ASP administrators. This chapter discusses the major findings of the study in relation to the existing literature and the aforementioned research questions. Insights are drawn from both survey and interview data to provide a nuanced understanding of current practices, decision-making processes, and perceived program effectiveness. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of this study, which then inform implications for future research and practice.

Research Question One

What supports are ASPs currently providing for autistic students at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S., and do these supports correspond with the areas of need for this population identified through a review of the literature?

Findings from both the survey and interview data revealed a wide range of services offered by ASPs across the U.S., with notable patterns emerging regarding the types of support prioritized and the departments responsible for their delivery. While many participants reported offering academic and social support, both of which are consistently cited in the literature as essential (e.g., Cage et al., 2020; Cage & Howes, 2020; Cola, 2020; Gothberg et al., 2015; Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Petcu et al., 2021), they were less consistent in other domains such as mental health, employment, and independent living. This supports the initial hypothesis that

academic and social supports would be the most widely offered services within ASPs, while employment and independent living would receive comparatively less emphasis. Survey data revealed that academic services, particularly executive functioning coaching, and social opportunities such as structured activities, peer mentoring, and social skills instruction were among the most consistently reported offerings, with endorsement rates ranging from 75% to 92%. In contrast, approximately only two-thirds of survey participants reported providing supports related to career development and independent living (61.5% and 66.6%, respectively), aligning with the prediction that these areas, though increasingly recognized as important (Flegenheimer & Scherf, 2022; Shattuck et al., 2012), may continue to be less of a focus among ASPs. This trend seems to have held steady, as Viezel et al. (2020) also found that students participating in an ASP could expect to receive academic/executive functioning and social supports, and perhaps vocational and/or independent living supports.

Provision of Services and Supports Meeting the Identified Needs of Autistic College Students

Several needs of autistic students enrolled at four-year postsecondary institutions in the U.S., as identified by a review of the literature, were endorsed by survey and/or interview respondents. These included academic coaching, particularly executive functioning coaching, opportunities for social engagement, goal setting and attainment, mental health support, mitigation for sensory discomfort, a dedicated program space, independent living supports, and career development. Survey respondents, including participants who also completed a follow-up interview, also indicated that they provide social skills training and development for their students. However, the literature largely indicated that autistic college students do not want to participate in formal skills training or a special curriculum (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Scheef et al., 2019). This discrepancy may be due in part to a

difference in understanding of the term “training and development.” Because there were no examples or definitions given with the support options on the survey, it is possible that participants’ understanding of “social skills training and development” to be more informal, in the moment prompting, rather than a formal program or curriculum as I intended it to be. Considering that most of the interview participants selected “social skills training and development” as one of their programmatic offerings on the survey, yet none of them referenced a formal curriculum in their interviews, and some even explicitly stated that they do not conduct formal social skills training or development, this seems a likely conclusion.

Difficulties with executive functioning have been widely documented for autistic individuals (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Alverson et al., 2019; Barnhill, 2016; Davidson et al., 2023; Dijkhuis et al., 2020; Granader et al., 2014; Hill, 2004; Kenworthy et al., 2008; Stark & Lindo, 2022). Executive functioning coaching was specifically referenced as a need for autistic college students in my review of the literature (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Scheef et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2015). Schindler et al. (2015) noted that executive functioning was a necessary and primary focus of academic coaching, as all but one of their participants consistently referred to struggling with executive functioning tasks related to time management, organization, and accountability, as well as difficulties with attention, focus, and assignment due dates. Per the results of this study, executive functioning coaching is an area of need that was largely being met by ASPs, with roughly 85% of survey respondents and 100% of interview respondents endorsing the provision of such for their students. Executive functioning coaching was identified by interview participants as being a prominent feature of their meetings with students, and many indicated that, as a result, they had seen gains in student GPAs, executive functioning skills, communication, and problem-solving.

Another widely documented area of difficulty for autistic individuals is social engagement (APA, 2013; Ashbaugh et al., 2017; Bolourian et al., 2018; Cage et al., 2020; Gurbuz et al., 2019; Knott & Taylor, 2014; Longtin, 2014; Madriaga & Goodley, 2010). This was reflected in my review of the literature, with four articles indicating this as an area of need for students in their studies (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Cullen, 2015; Scheef et al., 2019). With just over 92% of survey participants and 100% of interview participants indicating that they provided opportunities for social engagement for their students, this was an area of need that is also largely being addressed by ASPs. It should be noted, however, that though all the interview participants described social events and activities as being a vital part of their programs, half of the interview participants shared that they sometimes struggle with student engagement when it comes to structured social activities. The common denominator between these participants' experiences seems to have been a lack of student input on the structured activities they were hosting. By shifting to a more student-focused planning process, participation in structured events increased for all three programs. This is important for ASP administrators to note when considering what to offer their students so they ensure that their students are included in the planning process.

Social skills instruction and development were also very common offerings for participants in my study, with 82% of survey participants and 100% of interview participants endorsing them as a program offering. Unlike opportunities for social engagement, however, social skills interventions, groups, and programs were very much not preferred among the autistic college students in the studies that were included in my review of the literature (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019), despite the considerable amount of research supporting the effectiveness and worth of social skills programs and interventions such

as the Multimodal Anxiety and Social Skills Intervention (MASSI; White et al., 2013) and the Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS; Laugeson et al., 2015). However, given that a systematic review of the literature conducted by Monahan et al. (2023) showed that there is a lack of input from autistic individuals regarding the design and measurement of social skills interventions for young adults, it should not come as a shock that autistic college students are not enamored with these programs. As previously discussed, this significant discrepancy may be attributable to a misunderstanding of what was meant by “social skills training and development.”

My review of the literature indicated that the development of self-determination skills, namely self-awareness and goal setting/attainment, were key indicators of success as well as a substantial area of difficulty for some students (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Scheef et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2015). While self-awareness was not a topic that was discussed in this study, goal setting and attainment were discussed by interview participants as being a focus of person-centered planning meetings; additionally, it was included as an indicator of student success by survey and interview participants alike. Rowe et al. (2020) recommended goal setting and attainment as one of the key strategies in fostering student-led learning and experiences when supporting autistic college students. They posited that this practice gives students agency and empowers them to actively make changes and/or pursue experiences they seek to gain. Fostering this within the context of an ASP provides the students with accountability and support in achieving success (Rowe et al., 2020).

Parental involvement with ASPs, whether direct or indirect, can be both positive and negative for their adult children with autism. Multiple interview participants in this study echoed almost word for word one of the articles included in my literature review when they described

the less positive outcomes for students who were in the program at their parents' behest. All shared that these students were less engaged, participated in fewer program activities, met fewer program expectations, made less progress, and achieved fewer goals than their peers who were enrolled in the program voluntarily. The article in the literature review specifically noted that while parental involvement could be very beneficial for their student(s), it was not uncommon for parents to be overbearing and overly involved in their adult child's decision-making and academic work, thus leading to insufficiencies in their student's self-determination skills (Schindler et al., 2015). To counter this, one interview participant implemented a parental communication structure, where the student and their assigned mentor provided an update to the student's parents once every week, typically via email or a short phone call. This strategy allowed the student to control the narrative by proactively sharing information in a manner with which they were comfortable with their parents before it was requested. The same participant shared that they also personally conduct end-of-semester meetings with each student, their assigned mentor, and at least one parent to solicit feedback, assess the student's progress, and determine what the program might look like for them moving forward. Another interview participant who discussed parental involvement reported that they meet with the student and their parent(s) at the beginning of the semester to set clear expectations and establish open and transparent communication. These efforts were designed to manage parental involvement and foster independence in their students; thus far, they have seemed to have been very effective. These strategies underscore the importance of finding the right balance between parental involvement and student independence.

As previously discussed, independent living and career development/employment skills supports were less prevalent than supports in the academic and social realms across programs.

Only one article in the literature review referenced independent living supports, but it described independent living skills as a challenge for many autistic students, regardless of where and with whom they resided. Their interviews with autistic college students indicated a need for skills related to prioritization, healthy eating, navigating transportation, and maintaining proper hygiene (Cullen, 2015). Interview participants largely discussed independent living skills in relation to general household activities (e.g., cooking, cleaning, laundry), living in a shared residence hall, and finances. One interview participant described a unique opportunity that their program provided for developing independent living skills: an on-campus supported residence hall. This innovative program feature allowed autistic students to live in a residence hall with other autistic students in the institution's ASP and provided programming and real-world practice opportunities for independent living skills. The drawback to this program was that there was an additional fee to participate in addition to the ASP fee, tuition and fees, and room and board, thus making it inaccessible to a large portion of autistic college students and less scalable to other programs.

Career development/employment skills supports were also referenced in one article that was included in the literature review and was referred to more in the context of being a marker for success; students in that study discussed the correlation between graduating college and obtaining a job in their field of study (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019). Within this study, one interview participant reported that they engaged an employment specialist on their team, while two other participants described extensive partnerships with their institutions' career centers. These strategies allowed their students to engage in tailored, systematic curricula with subject-matter experts. This also allowed for program staff and resources to be focused on other areas of need that were not covered by other departments within the institution, in essence, maximizing

their available resources to their students' benefit. Maximizing campus partnerships, as embodied here, allows programs to focus on the supports and services that are not effectively offered elsewhere at the institution.

Provision of Services and Supports Not Meeting the Identified Needs of Autistic College Students

It is widely acknowledged that autistic individuals, particularly those in the college setting, face significant mental health struggles, especially as compared with their non-autistic peers (Gurbuz et al., 2018; Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Lai et al., 2019; McKenney et al., 2024; McLeod et al., 2020; Noble et al., 2024; Petcu et al., 2021). The results of my literature review reflected this, with almost a third of the articles indicating that counseling was a preferred support in college (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Viesel et al., 2020). Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019) found that among the autistic students who participated in their study, the combination of autism and mental health struggles, particularly when combined with other diagnoses, frequently and negatively impacted students' academic and social performance. Unfortunately, the results of this study did not reflect that this need is consistently being met, as only 23.1% of survey respondents and one interview participant indicated that they provide mental health counseling through their respective programs. Some interview participants did, however, discuss referring their students to the counseling centers on campus, and one discussed intentionally providing supports directly related to promoting students' well-being. The one interview participant whose program provides mental health counseling named this service among the most beneficial of their program and acknowledged that this practice is far from the norm among ASPs. It would be unrealistic for many ASPs to offer in-house mental health counseling by a licensed provider, which is why establishing strong

partnerships with university counseling services is critical to supporting autistic students' mental health needs.

Another area of need for autistic college students that was identified through my literature review that was not reflected in my study as a common offering was subject-specific tutoring. One study found that 65% of their participants ranked subject-specific tutoring in general as one of their most used support services (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019). These students indicated that they wanted individual assistance in a discrete location with the same tutor every week, as this allowed them to receive this preferred support in a safe and comfortable way without revealing their autism to new or unknown individuals. To increase their ability to serve all students, the program effectively recruited their students' peers to serve as tutors, who in turn became considered mentors by the students (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019). The single-most subject in which students sought tutoring was writing, with 57% ranking the Writing Center specifically as one of their most used support services, a trend echoed in two other studies (Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Hadley & Zhang, 2021; Schindler et al., 2015). As with mental health counseling, however, subject-specific tutoring was not a common offering among the participants of my study. Only four survey participants reported offering tutoring services; there were no interview participants whose programs offered subject-specific tutoring. Another study in my literature review corresponded more with this finding than the findings of the previously discussed article, as their study found that only 15.6% of the programs for which the information was available reported tutoring as a support offering (Viezel et al., 2020), indicating that the ASP surveyed by Accardo and colleagues was somewhat unique in their offering of subject-specific tutoring for their students. ASP administrators and staff are unlikely to be subject matter experts in the subjects in which their students require tutoring. As such, it would

behoove ASPs to find ways to meet their students' need for instruction in a discrete, familiar space, perhaps by partnering with campus tutoring centers to have a group of specific tutors come to the ASP space at certain times throughout the week and/or designate specific tutors to work with ASP participants so they meet with the same person every time.

Finally, the results of my study did not reflect that ASPs are meeting the identified need for their students to have access to faculty mentors. Research on faculty mentoring for college students in general (Foster et al., 2015; Law et al., 2021; Livingstone & Naismith, 2018; Miske & Sogunro, 2024; Rowe & Zamiela, 2023; Santora et al., 2013; Vallade & Rudick, 2024) and autism specifically (Luey, 2014) has shown to be an effective practice for increasing student engagement and retention. As Livingstone and Naismith (2018) described it, "There is a clear consensus that mentoring has become increasingly important in higher education to facilitate integration into the culture of a programme and institution and is pivotal as a student support mechanism to the success of students' learning" (p. 78). From my review of the literature, the findings of Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019) and Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff (2019) echoed this sentiment, reporting that the students in their studies highly valued having a faculty mentor, with 39% and 48%, respectively, endorsing it as one of their most used supports. Both studies indicated that a faculty mentor was a preferred support because the students valued the connection with someone who was within their major but had more experience in Academia than their peers. Despite this evidence, only nine survey participants (23.1%) reported that their ASP provided access to faculty mentors for their students, while none of the six interview participants discussed it as an option within their respective programs. Given the highly expressed need by autistic students to engage in faculty mentorship, ASPs should identify a network of autism-friendly instructors who can serve as mentors for their students.

Discrepancies Between Survey and Interview Responses

The six interview participants represented a small subset of survey respondents (11.5%), and while the majority of their responses reflected the larger majority of responses, five were notably divergent. Discrepancies were found in levels of executive functioning coaching, independent living skills development/instruction, proctored study halls, social skills training, a summer transition program, and funding sources. In all cases except for funding sources, the interview respondents had higher rates of offering the service/support than the overall group, though some much more so than others. There are many possible reasons for these differences, chief among them the different framing of questions across data collection methods and shared characteristics of interview participants.

Naturally, there were differences in the way that questions were asked from the survey to the interview. On the survey, participants were given a list of services/supports and asked to indicate whether or not a support/service was offered by a different department within the institution, directly by the ASP, or not provided at all. Due to the nature of an online survey, there was no elaboration or opportunity for participants to ask clarifying questions, leaving the questions and responses open to interpretation. In an interview, however, the participant has direct access to the researcher, giving the participant the opportunity to request additional context and the researcher to ask follow-up questions. Therefore, it is possible that the individuals who participated in the follow-up interview had more clarity and gave different responses when I asked follow-up questions in the interview. For example, on the survey, all six interview participants indicated that social skills instruction was offered directly by their program. In the interviews, however, it was clarified by some that while they do work with students on

developing their social skills, they do so informally through observation and conversation. When evaluated through this lens, the ratio of positive interview to survey responses was roughly equal.

Summary

The findings for RQ1 contribute to the growing body of literature on postsecondary ASPs by offering a snapshot of current service provision across the U.S., highlighting areas of alignment and misalignment with autistic students' stated needs as identified through a review of the literature. Importantly, it reinforces that while ASPs are generally responsive in providing supports for areas that are well-represented in the literature and widely recognized as essential (e.g., academic and social supports), gaps remain in areas such as independent living, career development, mental health support, subject-specific tutoring resources, and faculty mentorship. These gaps suggest a lingering inconsistency between what autistic students say they need to thrive in college and what institutions are consistently willing or able to offer. These findings underscore the importance of listening to and incorporating autistic students into the decision-making process and considering program adjustments that reflect these inputs to promote environments for success for autistic students in higher education.

Research Question Two

How do ASP administrators at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S. decide which services to provide, and what informs their decision-making process?

Decision-Making Processes

The majority of the interview participants indicated that decision-making for their program is a group effort involving all or most of the program staff. One participant reported that decisions were made by them (the director) and the assistant director, and the last participant shared that they were the sole decision-maker for their program, but they needed final approval

from their boss for budgetary purposes. Though program decisions were largely reported to be made in-house, two participants indicated that once they had made a decision, it had to be approved by an external advisory board. One of the advisory boards consisted of key stakeholders across the institution and the community and the parent of an autistic individual. The other participant stated that they include older students from their program who were voted into their advisory board positions by the other students in the program. Another participant shared that they present any new decisions to the program participants to ensure they will have buy-in. What the last two final approval processes have in common is that they intentionally included individuals with autism, a best-practice strategy for working with autistic individuals (Burke et al., 2024; Leadbitter et al., 2021; Ne’eman, 2010; Peña et al., 2020; Reutebuch et al., 2015).

Interview participants reported a variety of sources from which they drew information to inform their decision-making processes, namely student feedback, national professional organizations, other ASPs, partnerships with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), and the literature. Of these, student feedback emerged as the most commonly cited and influential source of guidance, a practice aligned with established best practices for supporting autistic individuals (Burke et al., 2024; Leadbitter et al., 2021; Ne’eman, 2010; Peña et al., 2020; Reutebuch et al., 2015). By soliciting feedback from program participants, ASP administrators were able to tailor their offerings to align with students’ expressed preferences, increasing the likelihood of engagement and perceived benefit. This participatory approach also fostered a sense of autonomy and agency among students while respecting their dignity as individuals (Cook-Sather, 2002; Klemencic, 2017; Leadbitter et al., 2021; Peña et al., 2020; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007).

Although little quantitative or intervention-based research currently exists to evaluate the effectiveness of feedback-driven decision-making in ASPs, this may reflect the highly individualized nature of autism support in postsecondary settings rather than a lack of rigor. In environments where student needs vary widely, responsiveness and adaptability may be more practical than standardized interventions.

Collaboration with Stakeholders

Participants who received grant and/or VR funding reported that they were beholden to the funding organization's contract and expectations, which typically informed what services needed to be provided but left the individual programs to decide how to implement them. Communities of practice were also reported to be of benefit in informing decisions, a strategy made possible by organizations such as the CAN. The CAN has united ASPs in serving the same purpose by facilitating connection and research. Organizations like the CAN are essential for creating communities of practice that allow programs to communicate freely and effectively, particularly when there is a limited research base, as there is regarding ASPs.

In addition to collaborations with other ASPs through the CAN, interview participants reported collaborations with in-house entities such as career and disability services, housing, professional programs, and tutoring centers. Participants indicated that these partnerships allowed them to better support their students and provide additional services without expending additional funding or work. These connections are vital for ASPs, for which funding is typically scarce and/or expertise in such is limited. For example, subject-specific tutoring was among the top needs expressed by autistic students in my literature review, yet it was one of the most underprovided services by the ASPs in my study. For programs that lack the time, funding, and appropriate staffing to provide this service, a strong partnership with the institution's tutoring

centers can create opportunities for their students to receive one-on-one tutoring with the same person every time in a discrete location, described as a strong need by Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff (2019). Without this partnership, however, tutoring centers would be unaware of these needs, and program participants may be less likely to use this resource.

Barriers to Providing Services

As can be expected, interview participants reported having faced external and internal barriers to providing desired services. The most notable external barrier shared by participants was the current political climate. In a time when certain states are decrying equal rights and actively abolishing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, it is no wonder that programs in these states are being limited in their ability to provide services. One participant shared that their program enrollment had been down and speculated that autistic individuals might be hesitant to move to their state because of these discriminatory policies. Another participant described being limited in their ability to conduct outreach and education about neurodiversity on behalf of their students due to a recently passed state law prohibiting institutions of higher education in their state from engaging in specified DEI activities. This same law took away other institutional supports that their students often used, such as the multicultural center and LGBTQ+ initiatives. With the current administration issuing executive orders directing the abolishment of DEI across the country, these barriers are likely to spread to all ASPs, drastically limiting opportunities for funding and programs' abilities to fully support their students. As the former interview participant speculated, the systemic spread of discriminatory practices may lead to fewer autistic students attending college and thus enrolling in ASPs across the board.

Internal barriers faced by the interview participants are fairly typical in academia (e.g., lack of student engagement and funding and insufficient space, time, and staffing; Anthony et al., 2020; Crabtree, 2023; Crabtree et al., 2021). Given the difficulties autistic students face in navigating the college environment from an executive functioning aspect and the likelihood that their social struggles will lead to self-isolation and mental/emotional exhaustion from masking (Hamilton & Petty, 2023), it is not especially surprising to me that student engagement may be a struggle for ASPs. To counter this, Peña et al. (2020) recommend using a community-based, participatory approach, which incorporates “the ‘nothing about us without us’ mindset... into any study involving outcomes and satisfaction considerations when engaging in the development or assessment of programming for autistic students” (p. 234). The authors’ logic follows that “If autistic stakeholders are not part of program design, they will be less likely to see/maximize the benefits of the program” (Peña et al., p. 234).

Funding is always an internal barrier in academia (Cheslock & Shamekhi, 2020; Goff-Albritton et al., 2022), and ASPs are no exception. To mitigate this, many programs, including two-thirds of this study’s interview participants’ programs, employ a fee-based model. Alternative funding methods included grants, donations, and, much less often, institutional funds. Only one interview participant indicated that their program receives funding from their institution, yet all participants referenced their institution’s use of their program as a bragging point and/or recruitment tool. It is unfortunate that institutions receive such benefits from having an ASP, and yet the ASP does not receive anything from the institution in return.

The other barriers reported by interview participants are also not unique to their individual programs (e.g., insufficient time, staffing, and space). Though not consistent across all of them (one private institution lamented their lack of appropriate staffing), interview

participants located at private institutions expressed less of an issue with their allotment of space and staffing than their counterparts at public institutions. A possible explanation for this could be that these particular private institutions may be disproportionately wealthier than the public institutions represented in this study. Additionally, private colleges often have more direct access to donor and alumni funding, which may be specifically designated to support disability services or ASP-related initiatives, especially when donors have personal connections to autism or neurodiversity advocacy.

Summary

These findings highlight the collaborative decision-making processes within ASPs, emphasizing the crucial role of student feedback, interdepartmental collaboration, and professional networks like CAN. While many interview participants demonstrated a clear commitment to reflective practice and student-centered design, this research reinforces that decision-making does not occur in a vacuum. It is shaped by institutional resources, funding sources, political landscapes, and access to professional communities. The findings also show that including autistic individuals in advisory roles, whether formally through boards or informally through feedback, aligns with best practices and has tangible impacts on program relevance and engagement. This contributes to a deeper understanding of how ASPs evolve and adapt, offering a practical outline for other institutions seeking to develop or refine their own support services in partnership with autistic students.

Research Question Three

What practices have ASP administrators at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S. found to be most and least beneficial for program participants?

Interview participants shared the practices and activities that they had found to be beneficial, as well as those that did not achieve the desired result. In the latter case, participants described the actions they took to improve the practice/activity.

Practices Found to be Beneficial

The practices expressed to be most beneficial by two or more interview participants were not surprising, given that my review of the literature also found them to be areas of need for autistic students in postsecondary education. These included individual meetings, peer mentoring, opportunities for social engagement, and a dedicated program space.

The most beneficial practice, as determined by the frequency it was mentioned, was the individual meetings between the student and their mentor/coach. Participants noted that these meetings were a time for the students to set goals, problem-solve, and get back on track if things were going awry with their classes. One participant described individual meetings as “the biggest anchor of the program.” It is not surprising then, that 92.1% of survey participants in this study endorsed offering individual meetings. Individual meetings have also been found to be a beneficial support in the literature (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Flannery et al., 2000; Scheef et al., 2019; Schindler et al., 2015). It is somewhat difficult, however, to find an accurate accounting of programs offering individual meetings or to assess the effectiveness of this practice, as the nomenclature for one-on-one meetings is inconsistent. For example, the program personnel conducting individual meetings may be referred to as an academic coach, a mentor, a life coach, or a tutor, while the meetings themselves may be referred to as coaching, person-centered planning, mentor check-ins, one-on-ones, or 360 meetings, to name a few (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Barnhill, 2016; Viezel et al., 2020). The consistent endorsement of individual meetings by both survey and interview participants highlights their

central role in fostering student success within ASPs. These one-on-one interactions provide not just academic support, but a space for building trust, setting meaningful goals, and cultivating self-determination, all critical components of a student's college experience (Flannery et al., 2000). Despite inconsistencies in terminology, the underlying practice remains a cornerstone of effective programming, underscoring the need for broader recognition, clearer documentation, and continued investment in personalized support as a foundational feature of ASPs.

Though peer mentoring was a common offering among interview participants, only two participants discussed it as a more beneficial practice. Additionally, there was a steep drop-off in the number of programs offering individual meetings to those offering peer mentoring according to survey responses (92.1% and 74.3%, respectively). Despite this, peer mentoring is largely supported in the literature as beneficial for autistic students (Locke et al., 2024; Lucas & James, 2018; Mapes & Cavell, 2023; Roberts & Birmingham, 2017; Rowe, 2022; Thompson et al., 2018). The challenge with successfully implementing a peer mentor program for ASPs is recruiting and retaining mentors. In a study exploring the characteristics of potential peer mentors and incentives that may be necessary, Halverson and Lowmaster (2024) found that potential peers were largely extrinsically motivated to participate and seek either course credit or monetary incentives; those that were intrinsically motivated to serve as a peer mentor typically had high levels of agreeableness and had a history of interaction with an autistic individual. It is possible that the participants who did not include peer mentoring among their most beneficial practices have faced such obstacles in their attempts to implement a peer mentoring program. Notably, interview participants rarely mentioned technology-based tools (e.g., AI chatbots, virtual check-ins, or mobile apps) as substitutes or supplements for peer support, suggesting that personal connection is not easily replicated through digital means. This highlights the unique and

irreplaceable value of peer mentoring and supports the case for further institutional investment, whether through incentives, staffing, or structured training, to make these programs more feasible and impactful.

As with peer mentoring, opportunities for social engagement are an oft-cited need for autistic individuals (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Cullen, 2015; Scheef et al., 2019); yet only two participants reported that providing social events and activities was among the most beneficial practices. The remaining interview participants clearly viewed social activities and events as valuable, as evidenced by the fact that all participants reported them as an offering of their respective programs. One possible explanation for this discord could be that this was an area in which some participants struggled with student engagement. In this scenario, belief in the importance of a support/service is different from viewing the support/service as beneficial.

A shared benefit between participants in this study and the literature review was a dedicated program space for students. This program feature provided students with a safe, reduced-sensory space to unmask and be supported. Interview participants described these spaces as allowing their students to have their social needs met through body doubling (e.g., “two individuals occupying the same space, each being aware of each other’s presence, where both are working independently on individual tasks;” Born, 2024, p. 10) when they were too overwhelmed to engage in society’s expectations for social engagement. An additional benefit of a dedicated program space, as described by Scheef et al. (2019), was that it provided an opportunity for students to work on their homework and study for exams in a quiet, comfortable space.

Practices Found to be Less Beneficial

The most notable aspects of the practices that were reported to be less beneficial were the ways in which interview participants adjusted to better meet the needs of their students. One key shift that all interview participants made when a program practice was not achieving the desired result was to solicit feedback and input from their students. This idea echoes that of the “nothing about us without us” movement adopted by autism self-advocates from the disability rights movement, where autistic individuals demand anything that impacts the autism community (e.g., legislation, policy, research, services) should include autistic individuals in leadership and advisory roles (Charlton, 1998).

Summary

These findings advance the conversation around effective practices in ASPs by centering the perspectives of those leading them. The emphasis on practices such as individualized coaching, peer mentoring, opportunities for social engagement, and a dedicated program space aligns with student-reported needs from the literature and highlights the critical importance of responsiveness. Interview participants repeatedly emphasized that meaningful feedback loops (e.g., where student input directly shapes services) are not just best practices, they are essential. Moreover, these findings underscore persistent challenges, such as underutilized services and barriers related to engagement, staffing, and funding, suggesting that even well-intentioned programs may disappoint without practices that allow for continual refinement and student involvement. Ultimately, these findings contribute a practitioner-informed perspective that reinforces the power of adaptability, accountability, and collaboration in designing effective and meaningful supports.

Limitations

As with most research, this study had many limitations. Chief among them were survey attrition and non-response, unclear survey questions and instructions, missed opportunities of inquiry, a small interview sample size, homogeneity among interview participants, potential sampling bias, reliance on self-reported data, and lack of student voice. Additionally, this study provides only a temporal snapshot within the increasingly untenable landscape of higher education.

Limitations Related to the Survey

Although the initial impression suggested a roughly 50% response rate to the survey, the actual completion rate was closer to 40% once attrition and partial responses were considered. While all 52 participants answered the first six survey questions, responses dropped off significantly by the final section, with only 38–39 participants answering each of the last questions. The most substantial nonresponse occurred in the participant demographic section, where up to 35 participants skipped each question. One possible reason for this, as shared by a respondent via email, was that some programs do not collect demographic data on their students and, therefore, could not respond. This issue may have been mitigated by offering closed-choice ranges instead of open-ended fill-in-the-blank responses, providing clearer instructions (e.g., to enter “N/A” when data were unavailable), or including an option to skip the section altogether if such data was not collected.

Another survey question that could have yielded more useful data with improved design concerned program fees. Only 22 participants answered this question, in part because of embedded display logic. The survey asked participants to indicate all sources of funding; only those who selected “program fees” were shown the follow-up question regarding fee amount. This logic excluded any participant who may have skipped the first question or whose programs

charge fees in ways not captured by the available categories. As a result, it is unclear how many of the 30 non-responses were intentionally not answered versus due to survey design. Future iterations of the survey should remove the display logic, instead offering response options such as “no program fees,” “prefer not to disclose,” or “unsure” to ensure more complete data collection.

In addition, the absence of definitions or examples for some of the supports listed in the “Student Supports and Services” section likely introduced variability in interpretation. For example, although all interview participants indicated on their surveys that they provided “social skills instruction,” at least one participant later expressed opposition to formalized social skills curricula during the interview. This discrepancy suggests that some participants may have defined “social skills instruction” informally (e.g., through natural conversations, observational learning, or modeling), while others may have interpreted it to mean structured interventions, as was my intent. The lack of shared definitions may have undermined the consistency and comparability of responses.

Finally, the survey missed an opportunity to enrich the qualitative data collected through interviews. Including Likert-type questions about the perceived effectiveness or benefit of each support or practice could have provided a valuable quantitative layer, either confirming or challenging themes that emerged during interviews. Similarly, multiple-choice or ranking questions regarding decision-making processes and stakeholder involvement could have clarified how programmatic decisions were made across ASPs. These additions would have strengthened the ability to compare findings across methods and enhanced the study’s depth and interpretability.

Limitations Related to the Interviews

Some responses received during the interview process would have benefited from additional follow-up, particularly in areas where interview and survey responses deviated from each other. For instance, while most interview participants reported a lack of institutional financial support, more than 40% of survey respondents indicated the opposite. One possible explanation is that some programs were initially funded through external sources such as grants or donations, reducing the immediate need for institutional backing. However, I did not pursue this line of inquiry during the interviews, and none of the participants offered unsolicited explanations. As a result, I was unable to draw meaningful conclusions about the role of institutional origin in shaping funding structures. Had I asked follow-up questions specifically about funding history, I might have uncovered important context about how and why institutional financial support varies across programs.

Based on a review by Hennink and Kaiser (2022) of empirically grounded studies on qualitative saturation, interviewing between 12 and 13 participants is typically sufficient to achieve saturation, particularly when sampling from a relatively homogeneous population. I was able to conduct only six high-quality interviews for this study—roughly half the recommended number. While responses from these participants aligned closely with each other and with the survey data overall, suggesting that thematic saturation may have been reached, several meaningful discrepancies between interview and survey results indicate that saturation was likely not met across all thematic areas.

The homogeneity of my interview sample likely contributed to this false impression of saturation. All but one participant was highly involved in the College Autism Network (CAN) and actively engaged in professional communities of practice. The sole participant unfamiliar with CAN was in the first year of a doctoral program focusing on best practices in ASPs and thus

similarly invested in program development and evaluation. These shared traits may have unconsciously led participants to converge around similar perspectives, skewing the qualitative data toward a more idealized representation of ASPs than might be observed across a more diverse group of program administrators.

Limitations Related to Bias

One potential limitation of this study is sampling bias. All recruitment efforts were facilitated through the College Autism Network (CAN), from identifying initial programs listed on their website to distributing recruitment emails via their program directors' Listserv. While this network provided access to highly engaged programs, relying on a single source may have inadvertently excluded newer or less-established ASPs, or those whose administrators are less involved in professional communities of practice. By not conducting an independent, comprehensive search for programs, as done in studies like Viezel et al. (2020), I was dependent on a third-party database over which I had no influence or oversight.

Further, the six interview participants shared several overlapping individual and program characteristics. Their programs tended to be more comprehensive, and they appeared confident in their services and decision-making processes. This pride may have made them more comfortable participating in a research study and sharing programmatic details. Additionally, most were highly active within CAN and referenced the value of learning from other ASPs through this network. Individuals who are passionate about program development and invested in autism-related communities may have been more likely to engage with this study, particularly when they recognized shared professional interests—one participant even cited their own doctoral studies and similar research focus as a motivation to participate.

Bias may also have been introduced through reliance on self-reported data. Survey and interview participants were asked to identify their institutions, which rendered their responses confidential rather than anonymous. This may have increased the risk of social desirability bias or overreporting of program features and successes.

Lastly, although my study focused on the voices of program administrators, it did not include autistic students directly. While their insights were incorporated through a review of the literature, this study relied on administrators to speak to student needs and outcomes. Including autistic students in the data collection process would have introduced a vital, firsthand perspective and likely added greater nuance and depth to the findings.

Implications

Implications for Practice

The results of this study indicate that while ASPs at four-year institutions in the U.S. are largely meeting the self-described needs of autistic college students, there is still work to be done in the areas of mental health support, subject-specific tutoring and faculty mentorship.

Mental Health Support

Postsecondary education often intersects with a time in the lifespan when significant biological and psychosocial changes are occurring in the human brain (Berry, 2004; Solmi et al., 2022; Villemare-Krajden & Barker, 2024), and new stressors accompanying the transition from high school to college are introduced (Dias & Wang, 2023). The co-occurrence of these internal and external factors puts all emerging adults at increased risk of developing significant mental health challenges (Berry, 2004; Dias & Wang, 2023; Solmi et al., 2022; Villemare-Krajden & Barker, 2024). Prior to entering college, autistic individuals are already at increased risk for developing mental health disorders compared to their non-autistic peers (Gurbuz et al., 2018;

Hamilton & Petty, 2023; Lai et al., 2019; McKenney et al., 2024; McLeod et al., 2020; Noble et al., 2024; Petcu et al., 2021). When compounded by the aforementioned risk factors, it should come as no surprise that mental health supports are a desired and essential piece of the puzzle when supporting autistic college students. Only 23.1% of survey respondents and 17% of interview participants in this study indicated providing mental health counseling in any form. This reflects a significant gap that must be addressed, directly and/or indirectly, by ASPs if they are to fully meet the needs of their students.

Unfortunately, the survey did not allow participants to detail how mental health counseling is incorporated into their respective programs, nor was I able to find peer-reviewed examples in the literature that describe models of implementation. However, the one interview participant whose program does offer in-house counseling described a model that may be instructive for other programs. Their ASP is housed within a clinical psychology department, allowing for integrated, in-house provision of mental health services. While this structure may not be universally replicable, it offers a foundation from which other institutions can adapt similar practices.

In the absence of widespread empirical guidance, speculative but research-informed recommendations can be proposed for embedding mental health support into ASPs. One possibility is for ASPs to partner with the institution's counseling or clinical psychology graduate programs (where present) and serve as practicum or internship sites for trainees supervised by licensed professionals. This would allow for sustained, neurodiversity-affirming mental health support delivered by emerging professionals. A second option would be to establish a formalized collaboration with the institution's counseling center, wherein ASP students are placed on a priority list to be seen by a clinician trained to work with autistic

students. A third possibility would be for ASPs to directly hire or contract a licensed mental health professional using funds from program fees, grants, or insurance billing (where permitted). Other emerging strategies may include providing psychoeducational support groups centered on emotional regulation, identity, and coping (Mazefsky & White, 2014) or facilitating peer support initiatives that include mental well-being check-ins (Pointon-Haas et al., 2024; Shea et al., 2024).

Until more implementation-based research becomes available, ASPs have the opportunity and responsibility to develop and evaluate innovative models that meet their students' significant mental health needs. As this study illustrates, meeting academic and social needs is only part of the equation; without targeted, accessible, and affirming mental health supports, the potential of these programs remains inherently limited.

Subject-Specific Tutoring

Subject-specific tutoring emerged repeatedly in the literature as a key support for autistic college students, yet this service remains critically underprovided among ASPs. Only four survey participants and none of the interview participants indicated that their programs offered subject-specific tutoring, suggesting a significant gap between students' academic needs and the available services. Given its role in promoting academic success and confidence, particularly when delivered in consistent, comfortable environments (Hadley & Zhang, 2021), ASPs should explore innovative ways to integrate tutoring into their support offerings.

Unfortunately, much like mental health counseling, there is limited peer-reviewed literature describing how subject-specific tutoring is operationalized within ASPs. However, Accardo, Kuder, and Woodruff (2019) provide a useful, if brief, example from a disability resource center (DRC) that implemented subject-specific peer tutoring. In that model, trained

peer tutors offered drop-in and one-hour sessions to students with disabilities in a familiar and accessible space. While not an ASP-specific example, this method provides a strong foundation for adaptation.

One potential avenue for ASPs is to recruit upper-division undergraduates and/or graduate students as peer tutors who are available at regular intervals within the ASP's physical space. This could take the form of drop-in tutoring and/or scheduled one-on-one sessions tailored to individual student needs. Financial support for this model might be secured through program fees, targeted grants, or partnerships with academic departments.

An alternative, lower-cost strategy would involve collaboration with existing campus resources such as writing centers, math labs, or departmental tutoring services to bring trained staff or peer tutors into the ASP's space one to two times per week. This arrangement not only maintains the student's comfort and privacy but also promotes greater cross-campus awareness and expertise in working with autistic students. While scalable depending on institutional resources, these approaches reflect a proactive response to a clearly identified academic need and would meaningfully expand the supports ASPs provide.

Faculty Mentorship

Faculty mentorship represents a widely endorsed support need among autistic college students, with multiple studies highlighting its value in promoting academic success, persistence, and meaningful connection within the higher education environment (Accardo, Bean, et al., 2019; Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff, 2019; Colclough, 2018; Hadley & Zhang, 2021; Scheef et al., 2019). Despite this, only a small number of ASPs surveyed or interviewed for this study reported offering faculty mentorship as part of their programming, indicating a notable disconnect between student-identified needs and available supports.

Though literature detailing the implementation of faculty mentorship programs for autistic students specifically is limited, there is an emerging body of evidence from the broader field of disability support in higher education that offers relevant and adaptable strategies (see Adams & Hayes, 2011; Campbell-Whatley, 2001; Harris et al., 2011; Markle et al., 2017). Because autism falls within the broader umbrella of disability, it is reasonable to apply these research-based practices to autistic students, provided they are adapted with neurodivergent-informed and person-centered considerations and then monitored to ensure they are providing a benefit.

To initiate a faculty mentorship component, ASP administrators should begin by gauging faculty interest and identifying individuals who express enthusiasm for supporting autistic students; recruitment efforts can be strengthened by targeting faculty with strong student evaluations, disciplinary alignment with students' majors, and/or prior experience working with diverse learners (Harris et al., 2011; Markle et al., 2017). It is crucial to provide robust training at the outset, supplemented by regular refreshers and support, that includes content on neurodiversity, effective communication strategies, and inclusive mentoring practices (Campbell-Whatley, 2001; Markle et al., 2017). Maintaining a sustainable and positive mentorship experience requires attention to practical concerns: setting clear expectations, maintaining open lines of communication, and limiting time commitments to ensure long-term participation (Markle et al., 2017). Pairing students and mentors should be approached thoughtfully, with attention to shared interests, communication styles, and academic fields (Adams & Hayes, 2011; Campbell-Whatley, 2001; Harris et al., 2011). Additionally, gathering regular feedback from both mentors and mentees can support continuous program improvement and increase satisfaction (Adams & Hayes, 2011).

Ball State University's Faculty Mentorship Program (FMP; 2025), wherein first-semester freshmen with disabilities are paired with a faculty mentor, offers a replicable model, incorporating intentional recruitment, structured training, and ongoing program evaluation. Faculty mentors meet regularly with their mentees to support them with "the complexities of the academic experience at a university" (Office of Disability Services, 2025, para. 2). Program benefits listed on the FMP's website include "(a) personalizing the University experience for students with disabilities, (b) assisting students in understanding and meeting the academic challenges and expectations of college students, (c) connecting the departmental major to future occupational goals, and (d) informing students about requirements of students majoring in the faculty member's department as well as student clubs, organizations, and internships available with that major" (Office of Disability Services, 2025, para. 4–7). ASPs seeking to build similar initiatives should consider this model as a foundation while ensuring their approach is tailored to the unique needs and identities of autistic students.

Future Research

In seeking to understand how autism support programs meet the needs of autistic college students at four-year institutions in the U.S., this study uncovered both promising practices and areas of continued uncertainty, offering several key directions for future research. Future lines of inquiry should focus on the sustainability of ASPs and the long-term impacts on program participants and the institution, parental involvement in ASPs, independent living skills development, the inclusivity of ASP design and implementation, and the inclusion of student voices.

Sustainability of ASPs and the Long-Term Impacts on Program Participants and the Institution

A recurring theme among interview participants was concern over limited institutional investment in their programs, raising questions about long-term sustainability. Future research exploring the relationship between institutional financial support and key indicators, such as program effectiveness, student retention, and overall program longevity, could provide a compelling rationale for increased institutional investment in ASPs. Complementary research might examine autistic students' perceptions of their value to the institution, comparing those enrolled in institutionally funded programs to their peers in self-funded models. Case studies of ASPs that have successfully secured consistent financial backing from their institutions may further offer transferable strategies and best practices for programs seeking similar support.

There remains a significant gap in the literature regarding research-based practices within ASPs, particularly concerning long-term outcomes for participants. While a growing body of work has begun to identify key components of effective programming, little is known about the sustained impact of ASP participation post-graduation, such as success in meaningful employment, independent living, and overall quality of life. Longitudinal research following students from program entry through graduation and beyond would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the lasting influence of ASP participation. Such work could illuminate how these programs support students' growth in executive functioning, self-determination, social connection, and practical life skills over time.

As ASPs continue to expand across college campuses, it is equally important to assess their broader institutional impact. Future studies might explore how the presence of an ASP influences campus-wide factors such as student recruitment, perceptions of inclusivity among students and faculty, and shifts in institutional culture. Longitudinal analysis of institutional data, including ASP student demographics, engagement survey results, and campus climate

assessments, may yield meaningful insights into how ASPs contribute to a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. These findings could further inform institutional decision-making, enhance ASP visibility, and promote the development of sustainable, impactful programming for autistic college students.

Parental Involvement in ASPs

It is natural for parents to feel concern when their adult child transitions to college, particularly when that child is autistic. The articles in my literature review highlight that parental involvement can have both positive and negative implications for autistic students enrolled in college support programs. On the positive side, parents can serve as valuable partners in fostering student success by collaborating with ASP professionals, reinforcing program goals at home, and encouraging consistent participation; their involvement can also help create continuity between high school and college services and provide students with a trusted source of emotional support during the transition (Cullen, 2015; Sullivan, 2016). However, the literature also warns of potential drawbacks. Overinvolvement, such as making academic or personal decisions on behalf of the student, contacting program staff without the student's knowledge, or enrolling the student in an ASP without their consent, can undermine the student's autonomy and self-determination (Schindler et al., 2015). In these cases, parental behavior may unintentionally hinder the development of independence, self-advocacy, and confidence that ASPs are designed to promote.

This dual nature of parental involvement was echoed in the interview data. Multiple participants described students who had been enrolled in their program by a parent rather than through their own initiative and consistently noted that these students were less engaged, less likely to meet expectations, and showed limited progress compared to their peers. Buchanan and

LeMoyne (2020) define helicopter parenting as “over-involved parenting, or hovering... in ways that can negatively impact the development of independence” (p. 18), and research has linked this parenting style to reduced self-efficacy and poorer mental health outcomes in young adults (Reed et al., 2016). Interview participants emphasized the importance of student buy-in and highlighted the delicate balance required to keep families informed while prioritizing student autonomy. Across these discussions, a common theme emerged: while parental involvement can be highly beneficial, overinvolvement, particularly in academic and decision-making processes, can hinder student growth.

Despite these concerns, limited research exists on what constitutes an appropriate level of parental involvement for college students and even less for those enrolled in ASPs. Further investigation into the balance between supporting students and fostering autonomy could help ASPs refine their approach to parent engagement. A mixed-methods study exploring how parental involvement affects students’ autonomy, self-efficacy, and decision-making would provide valuable insights for programs seeking to strike the right balance that supports both students and their families.

Independent Living Skills Development and Training

Without an immersive, residentially embedded program such as an on-campus supported residence hall staffed by trained peers, it can be challenging for ASPs to deliver meaningful, real-time support in the area of independent living skills. Much of what students need assistance with (e.g., hygiene routines, room organization, or roommate dynamics; Flegenheimer & Scherf, 2022) occurs in their personal living spaces, making it difficult for program staff to observe or intervene naturally. This challenge is compounded by the fact that ASP administrators are adults and often of a different gender than the students they serve, which may raise privacy concerns or

violate institutional policies around residential access. Even the participant whose program relied on undergraduate peer coaches noted limited effectiveness in this domain after the program discontinued systematic dorm visits. Perhaps these barriers contribute to why independent living skills development is a less commonly offered support within ASPs, despite its well-documented importance in the literature.

Future research is needed to explore innovative, ethical, and student-centered ways of delivering independent living support in a college environment. Investigating models such as embedded peer coaching, virtual scaffolding, or partnerships with residence life staff may yield valuable insights into how ASPs can better meet students' needs in this area. Additionally, evaluating the outcomes of residentially immersive programs—where they do exist—could help determine their efficacy and offer scalable strategies for broader adoption.

Inclusivity of ASP Design and Implementation

It is not uncommon for ASPs to offer multiple levels of support for their students, often beginning with more intensive services and gradually fading them out as students progress through the program. This tiered approach was reflected in the findings of this study, with approximately 50% of survey and interview participants reporting the use of a tiered support model. Despite the apparent popularity of this practice, there is a notable lack of literature supporting the efficacy of tiered service delivery within ASPs. Given its prevalence, future research should investigate the impact of tiered models on both short- and long-term student outcomes. A useful starting point might be a comparative study between an ASP implementing a tiered support model and one offering uniform services to all participants to identify potential best practices for maximizing student growth and independence.

In addition, both the studies included in my literature review and the demographic data collected for this study indicate that ASPs predominantly serve White male students. However, recent prevalence estimates suggest that the gender gap in autism diagnoses is narrowing (Maenner et al., 2023) and that autism is now slightly more prevalent among Black children than White children (CDC, 2020; Yuan et al., 2021). These findings suggest that current ASP enrollment may not be representative of the broader autistic population and/or that ASP structures and recruitment practices may inadvertently favor White male students. Furthermore, there is a critical gap in the research concerning how ASPs can best support autistic students from marginalized racial, gender, and cultural identities. Future studies should examine how the incorporation of culturally responsive and intersectional frameworks within ASP design and implementation influences student engagement, satisfaction, and success. Investigations into the experiences of autistic college students who identify as LGBTQ+ and/or BIPOC would also offer valuable insights to guide inclusive program development.

Inclusion of Student Voices

This study explored what supports and services ASPs are currently providing, how and why those services were selected, and ASP administrators' perceptions of program effectiveness. However, because these programs are designed specifically to support autistic college students, it is essential to include their perspectives in any comprehensive evaluation of effectiveness.

Future research must center the voices of autistic students themselves to provide a more complete understanding of how ASPs function and how well student needs are being met. While understanding administrative decision-making is critical for uncovering how these programs are developed and implemented, omitting the perspectives of those most directly impacted leaves a significant gap in the research base.

Surveying and interviewing autistic students using parallel questions to those asked of ASP administrators in this study would allow researchers to compare perceived and actual experiences of program beneficence. This approach would help determine where administrator perceptions align with or diverge from student priorities, ultimately contributing to a more balanced and holistic understanding of best practices. Centering autistic voices in future research is not only aligned with best practices in inclusive education and disability research (Burke et al., 2024; Charlton, 1998; Leadbitter et al., 2021; Ne’eman, 2010; Peña et al., 2020; Reutebuch et al., 2015) but is also critical to ensuring that ASPs evolve in ways that are truly responsive to the needs of the students they are intended to serve.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore the landscape of ASPs at four-year postsecondary institutions across the U.S., with a focus on what supports are being offered, how programmatic decisions are made, and which practices are perceived as most and least beneficial from the perspective of ASP administrators. The research was guided by three central questions: (1) What supports are ASPs currently providing for autistic students at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S., and how do these supports correspond with the areas of need for this population identified through a review of the literature? (2) How do ASP administrators at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S. decide which services to provide, and what informs their decision-making process? and (3) What practices do ASP administrators at four-year degree-granting universities in the U.S. report to be most and least beneficial for program participants? By examining survey and interview data side by side and integrating those findings with a systematic review of the literature, this study has illuminated not only patterns and gaps in

the provision of services and supports but also the priorities and challenges that shape ASP implementation, ultimately contributing to the development of best practices in the field.

As these programs continue to multiply across institutions, there remains a noticeable lack of research examining whether they are aligned with the self-identified needs and preferences of autistic students. By identifying both the strengths and limitations of current ASP offerings, this study equips researchers, practitioners, and institutional leaders with a deeper understanding of where support structures are thriving, and where they are falling short. While many ASPs are doing meaningful work, particularly in providing academic coaching and social supports, they often struggle to address equally essential domains such as mental health, career preparation, independent living, and culturally responsive practices. The limited availability of mental health services, the rarity of faculty mentorship, and the under-provision of subject-specific tutoring are not simply oversights; they are missed opportunities that may have real and lasting impacts on students' success, well-being, and post-graduation outcomes.

This study also draws attention to the broader institutional context in which ASPs operate—frequently under-resourced, under-supported, and undervalued by the very institutions that benefit from their presence. Without reliable funding and genuine institutional commitment, the growing momentum behind ASPs risks stalling. For these programs to be sustainable, they must be embraced as integral to the campus community rather than viewed as supplemental or optional.

Ultimately, this research calls for a shift in how we conceptualize and operationalize support for autistic college students. By documenting current practices and highlighting both promising strategies and critical oversights, this study contributes to the growing field of postsecondary autism research with practical, actionable insights for institutions. More

importantly, it advocates for reframing support as a dynamic, student-informed process that evolves alongside the diverse, complex, and shifting needs of the students it is designed to serve.

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Table 1*SPIDER Framework Criteria for Systematic Review of the Literature*

Framework Component	Description
Sample	Students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Students must be enrolled in or recently graduated (within six months) from a four-year undergraduate degree program at an institution of higher education in the United States. Students may have comorbid diagnoses (e.g., mental health, learning disability, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), but not a comorbid intellectual disability. Administrators of an Autism Support Program for undergraduate students at four-year institutions.
Phenomena of Interest	Experiences and needs of autistic college students
Design	Case study, focus group, interviews, survey, or practice brief.
Evaluation	General/skill areas of need to support college-level, undergraduate autistic students across their degree program; Autism support programs' addressing of those identified needs and how; General/skill areas of need that should be addressed within a college-level autism support program and how?
Research type	Qualitative, Survey, or Practice Brief (as related to descriptions of Autism Support Programs)

Table 2*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature*

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Voice/Participant	Autistic students enrolled in a Bachelor/undergraduate degree program at a four-year university in the US (public or private)	Administrators of the university not directly working in or with the autism support program or working with the disability resource center supporting students with all other disabilities;
	Administrators or directors of autism support programs at public or private four-year universities	Students at community/two-year colleges Parents/Caregivers Educators Practitioners Peers Non-degree seeking students/IPSE programs Students in online programs Students in graduate programs Autistic adults Transition-age students K-12/Early childhood IDD/Not autism
Methodology	Survey	Literature review/analysis
	Practice Brief Qualitative	Dissertation/Thesis Book/Chapter Op-Ed/Editorial/Preface Experimental studies aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of a practice or program
Focus	Experiences/perceptions/needs/skill needs/outcomes of autistic undergrad students pertaining to topics such as academics, social, independent living, career development, self-determination skills	Specific curriculum, training, instructional strategy/ intervention/instrument Not focused on autistic students and/or educational supports
	Autism Support Programs	Transition to college and associated skills or training K/12-Early childhood International

Table 3

Articles Rejected from Systematic Review of the Literature After Further Review in the Coding Stage

Article	Exclusion Criteria
Alverson, C. Y., Lindstrom, L. E., & Hirano, K. A. (2019). High school to college: Transition experiences of young adults with autism. <i>Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities</i> , 34(1), 52-64.	Parents/Caregivers; Students at community/2-year colleges
Bailey, K. M., Frost, K. M., Casagrande, K., & Ingersoll, B. (2019). The relationship between social experience and subjective well-being in autistic college students: A mixed methods study. <i>Autism</i> , 5, 1081-1092.	Students at community/2-year colleges
Barnhill, G. P. (2016). Supporting students with Asperger syndrome on college campuses: Current practices. <i>Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities</i> , 31(1), 3-15.	Students at community/2-year colleges
Bolourian, Y., Zeedyk, S. M., & Blacher, J. (2018). Autism and the university experience: Narratives from students with neurodevelopmental disorders. <i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i> , 48(10), 3330-3343.	Students in Graduate programs
Davidson, D., DiClemente, C. M., & Hilvert, E. (2023) Experiences and insights of college students with autism spectrum disorder: An exploratory assessment to inform interventions. <i>Journal of American College Health</i> , 71(1), 10-13.	Students at community/2-year colleges
Davidson, D., Winning, A. M., & Hilvert, E. (2023). Executive functioning and college adjustment in students with and without autistic traits. <i>Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability</i> , 35(4), 289-302.	IDD/Not autism
Gelbar, N. W., Shefcyk, A., & Reichow, B. (2015). A comprehensive survey of current and former college students with autism spectrum disorders. <i>Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine</i> , 88(1), 45-68.	Students at community/2-year colleges; Students in Graduate programs
Gillespie-Lynch K., Bublitz D., Donachie A., Wong V., Brooks P. J., & D'Onofrio, J. (2017). "For a long time our voices have been hushed": Using student perspectives to develop supports for neurodiverse college students. <i>Frontiers in psychology</i> , 8, Article 544.	Quasi-experimental

Table 3, continued

Articles Rejected from Systematic Review of the Literature After Further Review in the Coding Stage

Article	Exclusion Criteria
Jackson, S. L., Hart, L., Brown, J. T., & Volkmar, F. R. (2018). Brief report: Self-reported academic, social, and mental health experiences of post-secondary students with autism spectrum disorder. <i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i> , 48(3), 643-650.	Students at community/2-year colleges; Students in Graduate programs; Transition-age students
Jobe, L. E., & White, S. W. (2007). Loneliness, social relationships, and a broader autism phenotype in college students. <i>Personality and Individual Differences</i> , 42(8), 1479-1489.	IDD/Not Autism; Not focused on autistic students and/or educational supports
Longtin, S. E. (2014). Using the college infrastructure to support students on the autism spectrum. <i>Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability</i> , 27(1), 100-12.	Specific curriculum, training, instructional strategy/ intervention/instrument
McLeod, J. D. & Anderson, E. M. (2023). Autistic traits and college adjustment. <i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i> , 53(9), 3475-3492.	Students at community/2-year colleges
Robertson, S. M., & Ne'eman, A.D. (2008). Autistic acceptance, the college campus, and technology: Growth of neurodiversity in social and academia. <i>Disabilities Studies Quarterly</i> , 28(4).	Students in Graduate Programs; Practitioners; Not focused on autistic students and/or educational supports
Sarrett, J. C. (2018). Autism and Accommodations in Higher Education: Insights from the Autism Community. <i>Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders</i> . 48, 679-693.	Students at community/2-year colleges; Students in Graduate programs
Shmulsky, S., Gobbo, K., Donahue, A. T., & Banerjee, M. (2017). College students who have ASD: Factors related to first year performance. <i>Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability</i> , 30(4), 375-384.	Not focused on autistic students and/or educational supports

Table 4

Methodological Quality of Studies with a Survey Component for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature

Criterion	Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019)	Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff (2019)
<i>Introduction</i>		
1. Was the problem or phenomenon under investigation defined, described, and justified?	2	2
2. Was the population under investigation defined, described, and justified?	2	2
3. Were specific research questions or hypotheses stated?	2	2
4. Were operational definitions of all study variables provided?	1	1
<i>Participants</i>		
5. Were participant inclusion criteria stated?	2	1
6. Was the participant recruitment strategy described?	2	1
7. Was a justification/rationale for the sample size provided?	1	0
<i>Data</i>		
8. Was the attrition rate provided? (applies to cross-sectional and prospective studies)	2	0
9. Was a method of treating attrition provided? (applies to cross-sectional and prospective studies)	-	-
10. Were the data analysis techniques justified (i.e., was the link between hypotheses/aims/research questions and data analyses explained)?	1	2
11. Were the measures provided in the report (or in a supplement) in full?	1	0
12. Was evidence provided for the validity of all the measures (or instrument) used?	1	1
13. Was information provided about the person(s) who collected the data (e.g., training, expertise, other demographic characteristics)?	0	0
14. Was information provided about the context (e.g., place) of data collection?	2	2
15. Was information provided about the duration (or start and end date) of data collection?	0	0
16. Was the study sample described in terms of key demographic characteristics?	2	2
17. Was discussion of findings confined to the population from which the sample was drawn?	2	2
<i>Ethics</i>		
18. Were participants asked to provide (informed) consent or assent?	2	0
19. Were participants debriefed at the end of data collection?	0	0
20. Were funding sources or conflicts of interest disclosed?	2	2

Note. 0 = Not/barely addressed, 1 = Somewhat, but missing key information, 2 = Met/Yes

Table 5

Methodological Qualities of Qualitative Studies for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature

Criterion	Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019)	Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff (2019)	Colclough (2018)	Cullen (2015)	Hadley & Zhang (2021)
<i>Interview/Focus Group Studies</i>					
1. Appropriate participants are selected.	2	2	2	1	2
2. Interview questions are reasonable.	2	2	2	-	2
3. Adequate mechanisms are used to record and transcribe interviews.	2	2	2	1	1
4. Participants are represented sensitively and fairly in the report.	2	2	2	2	2
5. Sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality.	1	1	2	2	0
<i>Observation Studies</i>					
6. Appropriate setting(s) and/or people are selected for observation.	-	-	-	-	-
7. Sufficient time is spent in the field.	-	-	-	-	-
8. Researcher fits into the site and is unobtrusive.	-	-	-	-	-
9. Research has minimal impact on setting (except for action research).	-	-	-	-	-
10. Field notes systematically collected.	-	-	-	-	-
11. Sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality.	-	-	-	-	-
<i>Theory, Transparency, and Reflexivity</i>					
12. The role of theory is explained in the study.	0	0	2	0	1
13. Methodological/ interpretive choices explained; credible narrative.	2	1	2	2	2
14. Positionality and biases acknowledged and connected to methods.	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Data Analysis</i>					
15. Results are sorted and coded in a systematic and meaningful way.	2	2	2	2	2
16. Sufficient rationale is provided for what was included in the report.	2	2	2	2	2
17. Methods used to establish trustworthiness and credibility are clear.	2	2	2	2	2
18. Conclusions are substantiated by sufficient evidence and data.	2	2	2	2	1
19. Connections are made with related research.	2	2	1	2	1

Table 5, continued*Methodological Qualities of Qualitative Studies for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature*

Criterion	Scheef et al. (2019)	Schindler et al. (2015)	Sullivan (2016)	Viezel et al. (2020)
<i>Interview/Focus Group Studies</i>				
1. Appropriate participants are selected.	1	-	-	-
2. Interview questions are reasonable.	2	-	-	-
3. Adequate mechanisms are used to record and transcribe interviews.	2	-	-	-
4. Participants are represented sensitively and fairly in the report.	2	-	-	-
5. Sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality.	1	-	-	-
<i>Observation Studies</i>				
6. Appropriate setting(s) and/or people are selected for observation.	-	2	2	-
7. Sufficient time is spent in the field.	-	2	2	-
8. Researcher fits into the site and is unobtrusive.	-	2	2	-
9. Research has minimal impact on setting (except for action research).	-	2	2	-
10. Field notes systematically collected.	-	2	2	-
11. Sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality.	-	1	1	-
<i>Theory, Transparency, and Reflexivity</i>				
12. The role of theory is explained in the study.	0	0	0	0
13. Methodological/interpretive choices explained; credible narrative.	2	2	2	2
14. Positionality and biases acknowledged and connected to methods.	1	0	1	0
<i>Data Analysis</i>				
15. Results are sorted and coded in a systematic and meaningful way.	2	2	1	2
16. Sufficient rationale is provided for what was included in the report.	2	2	2	2
17. Methods used to establish trustworthiness and credibility are clear.	2	2	1	2
18. Conclusions are substantiated by sufficient evidence and data.	2	2	2	2
19. Connections are made with related research.	2	2	1	1

Note. From Garwood et al., 2023. 0 = *Not/barely addressed*, 1 = *Somewhat, but key information is missing*, 2 = *Met/Yes*
 Items 1-11 and 15-19 are from Brantlinger et al. (2005). Items 12-14 are from Trainor and Graue (2014).

Table 6*Participant Demographics for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature*

	Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019)	Accardo, Kuder, & Woodruff (2019)	Colclough (2018)	Cullen (2015)	Hadley & Zhang (2021)	Scheef et al. (2019)	Schindler et al. (2015)
Age							
18-19	11	n/a	1	8	-	3	10
20-21	5	n/a	1	4	-	2	1
22-23	5	n/a	*	3	-	3	*
24-25	2	n/a	*	2	-	1	*
26+	*	n/a	3	7	-	3	*
Race/Ethnicity							
White	n/a	40	3	15	-	-	9
Black	n/a	*	*	*	-	-	1
Asian	n/a	1	1	*	-	-	*
Hispanic	n/a	4	*	*	-	-	1
Multiple	n/a	*	1	*	-	-	*
Gender							
Male	20	41	4	14	2	9	7
Female	3	5	1	10	8	3	4
Other	*	2	*	*	*	*	*
College Level							
Freshman	18	30	1	7	10	3	11
Sophomore	^a	^a	2	5	^a	2	*
Junior	5	18	*	3	*	2	*
Senior	^b	^b	*	5	*	5	*
New Grad	*	*	2	*	*	*	*
Unknown	*	*	*	4	*	*	*
Degree Program							
STEM	5	13	*	n/a	1	5	6
Business	2	1	*	n/a	4	2	*
Education	*	2	1	n/a	2	*	*
Journalism	2	8	1	n/a	*	*	*
Fine Arts	5	4	*	n/a	*	1	*
Arts/Sci.	5	2	*	n/a	*	3	1
Humanities	1	8	*	n/a	3	3	*
Social Sci.	3	6	*	n/a	*	*	*
Undecided	*	3	*	n/a	*	*	4
Other	*	1	3	n/a	*	*	*

Note. * = null value

^a Combined with freshman

^b Combined with juniors

Table 7*Keywords for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature*

Keyword	Frequency	Study/Studies
Accommodations	3	Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019); Accardo Kuder, & Woodruff (2019)
Asperger's	2	Cullen (2015); Schindler et al. (2015)
Autism	4	Cullen (2015); Scheef et al. (2019); Shmulsky et al. (2015); Viesel et al. (2020)
Spectrum Disorder(s)	3	Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019); Accardo Kuder, & Woodruff (2019); Hadley & Zhang (2021)
College	3	Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019); Accardo Kuder, & Woodruff (2019); Viesel et al. (2020)
Needs	1	Cullen (2015)
Orientation	1	Shmulsky et al. (2015)
Services In	1	Cullen (2015)
Transition	1	Schindler et al. (2015)
Disability Supports	1	Scheef et al. (2019)
Education	1	Hadley & Zhang (2021)
Services	1	Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019)
Supported	1	Schindler et al. (2015)
First Year College Students	1	Hadley & Zhang (2021)
Learning Disabilities	1	Hadley & Zhang (2021)
Mental Health	1	Accardo Kuder, & Woodruff (2019)
Postsecondary Education	3	Scheef et al. (2019); Shmulsky et al. (2015); Viesel et al. (2020)
Transition(ing)	3	Accardo, Bean, et al. (2019); Hadley & Zhang (2021); Shmulsky et al. (2015)
University	2	Accardo Kuder, & Woodruff (2019); Viesel et al. (2020)

Table 8*Study Codes and Examples for the Research Study*

Code	Example Quote
Research Question 1	
Theme 1: Services and Supports	
Academics	“We try to focus first on academics and executive functioning. Make sure that they understand their syllabi and their assignments... what they're being asked, putting together a schedule to make sure that they're balancing everything, and they have time for themselves. They're working their [program] requirements into their schedules, those sorts of things.”
Career Development/ Employment Skills	“We recommend our students do what's called the Career Certificate, where they attend career development workshops, have their resume reviewed, and meet with a career counselor through the Career Center.”
Independent Living	“We do skill building so independent living skills, in the sense of if you were going to be living on your own, like actually in an apartment on your own, so cooking, managing, living with roommates, household skills, organization, things like that.”
Mental Health	“Let's see, definitely the therapy has been huge, especially in the past couple of years. We have just seen a huge... we already had a lot of students in therapy, but I think even since the pandemic, we've seen just even more of an increase in the need for therapy services and the complexity of the therapy services needed.”
Person-Centered-Planning	“Every student, no matter what level of the program they're at, gets that person-centered one-on-one support, where they meet with their... mentor for at least an hour a week and help with whatever goals they're moving towards.”
Peer Mentoring	“The mentors are... very interested in helping our students, not just build a friendship with them, but to expand their social network on campus. You know, I can do a lot with students in my meetings, we can do a lot of planning, but when it comes to the socialization part, we can talk about social situations. But, you know, I'm an adult, right? I'm not a peer. So, I think the peer level connection has allowed students to have just such a great college experience. I think we would really be missing a lot if we didn't have that.”
Dedicated Program Space	“Having that space on campus has been really awesome because it's not only a study space for them, but it's a place where I can come socialize with them throughout the week and support them, even if we don't have one-on-one meetings.”
Social	“I think the other big component is... the social component. It's always so great to see students who you come in, they didn't really have any friends in high school, or they didn't really have any social connections, and really be able to build relationships with peers.”

Code	Example Quote
Workshops/Program Specific Courses	“We try to hold at least one workshop a week. And those can look like a lot of different things. They are usually catered to a specific goal of the program or what we offer.”
Theme 2: Program Expectations	
Expectations	“If a student doesn't meet the requirement, it's not like we kick them out of the program or anything... It's still phrased as a requirement, but again, we're not kicking anyone out if they don't meet those requirements.”
Support Levels	“Students can be at three different levels of the program. The highest level of the program that a student can be at, that we require almost all incoming students to be, like first-year college students, is six hours a week.”
Theme 3: Money	
Funding Source(s)	“We're completely self-sustaining from a fund standpoint, so we operate solely on the fees that families pay.”
Research Question 2	
Theme 1: Decision-Making Processes	
Decision-Maker(s)	“It's really all of us [making the decisions], our admin staff, our students, our graduate assistants, our coordinators, and our director, we all sit down and discuss.”
Direct and Indirect Feedback	“We try and do at least the verbal feedback, if not written or online, for things like the workshops, what students liked about the workshop, if they would want to attend something like it again... If students come and they're engaged, even if it's only one or two, we view that as beneficial. And then the things that no one comes to, we take off our calendar. We talk about maybe what we could have done better. Why did no one attend those sorts of things and try and cater it to student needs.”
Involvement with National Professional Organizations	“Oh, the [College Autism] Summit, absolutely. We came back with so many ideas and hopes and conversations... I attended it with my assistant director, and the whole time we were just taking notes about better ways to support students.”
Other ASPs	“[I spent] a lot of time researching what other schools were doing... I went through [the CAN's database of ASPs], and I made a spreadsheet to see what everyone's doing, what they're charging, what they're, you know, programming and things like that.”
Partnerships with Vocational Rehabilitation	“That's really where we'll stay consistent, is that if it falls in line with the OVR funding, then that's kind of where we are.”
Review of the Literature	“Honestly, my personal research on it has been a big factor, just... reading the other research that shows what has been working.”

Code	Example Quote
Theme 2: Collaboration with Stakeholders	
Campus Stakeholders	
Career Services	“We do have a really awesome and active career development center on campus... so some of that is done kind of in tandem with career development... So that's not ours taken out of our schedule; it's something that is already offered here, but we do kind of cater to it as part of their program requirements.”
Disability Services	“We have a really good relationship with our Office of Disability Services here, so we do want the students to be taking the initiative there, but we would help them. We'd say, ‘Okay, we know there's an accommodation that might be helpful for you, so let's schedule a meeting with your caseworker, and let's have that discussion.’ So, we would definitely help the student and facilitate that.”
Housing	“Our housing office is amazing and very accommodating of our students, and that also allows them, so the way that things are set up here is that students are required to live on campus their first year, and then after their first year, it can be hard to acquire on-campus housing. But they consider it, as part of our program, kind of a medical necessity to live on campus if they want to, so our students can stay on campus as long as they would like.”
Professional Programs	“With the senior capstone students, we have had one to two for the past, like three years. This is our third group of Capstone students. And really their goal is to create some sort of program and run the program and collect data on the program.”
Tutoring Resources	“We always have somebody in the study hall, and this is very much just for body doubling. Our graduate assistants host the study halls, but it's really just for body doubling purposes, they can support a student with very surface-level things; if not, we refer out to the Learning Center or tutoring or their professors.”
Students’ Parents	“We do also have communication with family. So we, you know, it's a it's always a tricky line with parents. And an important part of you know, helping the student be successful. So, a lot of times, we'll do some check-ins throughout the semester with the student and their parent(s) so everyone is on the same page.”
Theme 3: Barriers	
External Barriers	“[State Bill] took away DEI, and so anything... that was DEI got disbanded. So, a lot of the supports that were provided to students on the faculty side and those programs for faculty were taken away, which means that the support for students also was removed, and that's been very challenging. Our multicultural center went away, our pride alliance went away, a lot of different things got

Code	Example Quote
	disbanded. So that has been huge, it's been a barrier, how we train, all that good stuff.”
Institutional Barriers	“Having people really, like, truly passionate about it, who are in higher admin would be really helpful.”
Lack of Engagement	“The biggest barriers are the students. If they're not motivated to be part of [an ASP], they're forced by their parents, or they don't know what [an ASP is], they don't get the support... they could benefit from.”
Lack of Staffing	“I think that the bandwidth of everyone is where it should be... We're always thinking of creative ways of utilizing interns, doctoral students, OT/PT, things like that.”
Funding Concerns	“It's not a guarantee that money is going to be there... that could change at any day, [with] administration changes and politics... I think [it] would become a barrier for us and our students if suddenly that [partnership] disappeared.”
Space Concerns	“Our program cap comes from space. If we had more space, our program could be bigger.”

Research Question 3

Theme: Program Effectiveness

Beneficial Practices	
Individual Meetings	“We try and make sure that they get what they need, but it also comes down to telling us and sharing their actual needs.”
Peer Mentoring	“Peer mentors are the other most effective support because they meet every week throughout the year... I think students really like that someone's checking in on them... offering advice if they need it... that's been really special for them.”
Social Events	“We've also noticed significant improvement in their social skills through the weekly events. They build a community, and that community doesn't just stop in that weekly event. They go and do other things on campus together, like have lunch, have coffee, go to the movies, go to escape rooms, whatever the case may be. So, we've seen that improvement as well. That's why we keep the events going and just have the program in general.”
Relationships with Faculty	“The context that we have with faculty and other campus support offices, we've really been able to create a good system where we're able to find out about issues before they become too big.”
Dedicated Program Space	“The [dedicated program space] gives them a space to not feel isolated and therefore promotes them doing better mentally, which connects to their academics. So, it's great socially, but it also impacts them in so many different ways.”
Avenues for Non-Verbal Communication	“Discord has been nice because they're able to create channels and talk about different things... There's so many different channels

Code	Example Quote
	that they can talk on about and it's not just like a messaging system, but it's a real way to build a social community, even online.”
Transparency in Communication	“So, it's an equal partnership. They know in advance what is expected of them, but there's some leeway to make mistakes so that we can help them continue to grow professionally... I think that transparent communication at the beginning really helps lay the foundation.”
Therapy	“So, I think us offering [therapy] in-house is really, really helpful, and I know that's one of the things that is different between our program and a lot of other programs out there.”
Non-Beneficial Practices	“We used to do what we called group meetings, which were like, I think they met every other week, and they were social skills oriented. We would pick a topic and kind of address that, and then, largely based on feedback from students and parents, they didn't love those, and so they liked just being able to socialize with the other students.”

Table 9*Institution: Public vs. Private*

Enrollment	Frequency	Percent
Public	22	42.3%
Private	30	57.7%

Table 10*Institution: Region*

Region	Frequency	Percent
Midwest ^a	10	19.2%
Northeast ^b	19	36.5%
Southeast ^c	9	17.3%
Southwest ^d	8	15.4%
West ^e	6	11.5%

^a Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin

^b Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont

^c Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington, D.C., West Virginia

^d Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas

^e Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawai'i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming

Table 11*Institution: Approximate Total Undergraduate Enrollment*

Enrollment	Frequency	Percent
<1,000	3	5.8%
1,000-4,999	15	28.8%
5,000-9,999	13	25.0%
10,000-25,000	12	23.1%
>25,000	9	17.3%

Table 12

Institution: Approximate Undergraduate Student Registration with Disability Resource Center for Academic Accommodations

Enrollment	Frequency	Percent
<500	9	17.3%
500-999	5	9.6%
1,000-1,499	3	5.8%
1,500-2,000	2	3.8%
>2,000	11	21.2%
Unknown	22	42.3%

Table 13

Institution: Approximate Undergraduate Autistic Student Registration with Disability Resource Center for Academic Accommodations

Enrollment	Frequency	Percent
<10	2	3.8%
10-49	5	9.6%
50-99	9	17.3%
100-200	10	19.2%
>200	5	9.6%
Unknown	21	40.4%

Table 14*Autism Support Program: Program Staff*

Classification	Frequency	Mean
Full-Time	114	2.19
Part-Time	87	1.71
Graduate Assistants	64	1.25
Interns	49	.94
Undergraduate Student Workers	78	1.53

Table 15*Autism Support Program: Student Participation*

Enrollment	Frequency	Percent
<5	3	6.3%
5-9	6	12.5%
10-19	8	16.7%
20-30	14	29.2%
>30	17	35.4%
No Response	4	-

Table 16*Autism Support Program: Length of Time in Existence*

Years	Frequency	Percent
<1 year ago	0	0.0%
1-2 years ago	5	10.4%
2-3 years ago	5	10.4%
3-5 years ago	5	10.4%
>5 years ago	22	68.8%
No response	4	-

Table 17*Autism Support Program: Supports for Additional Diagnoses*

Support for Additional Diagnoses	Frequency	Percent
No	21	42.9%
Yes	28	57.1%
No Response	3	-

Table 18*Autism Support Program: Additional Diagnoses Supported*

Diagnoses	Frequency	Percent
ASD Only ^a	6	20.0%
Any Neurodivergent Diagnosis	18	60.0%
ADHD	3	10.0%
Learning Disability	1	3.3%
Mental Health	2	6.7%
No Response	24	-

^a Students may have comorbid diagnoses, but they are required to have an ASD diagnosis as well.

Table 19*Autism Support Program Enrollment: Race/Ethnicity*

Race/Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent	Mean	No Response
White	576	61.2%	25.04	28
Black/African American	50	5.3%	2.38	31
Hispanic/Latinx	27	2.9%	1.42	33
Indigenous/Native American	1	.1%	.06	35
Asian/Pacific Islander	50	5.3%	2.5	32
Middle Eastern	11	1.2%	.58	33
Other	5	.5%	.31	36
Unknown	221	23.5%	10.52	31

Table 20*Autism Support Program Enrollment: Gender*

Gender	Frequency	Percent	Mean	No Response
Male	601	58.2%	20.03	23
Female	246	23.8%	8.48	24
Non-binary	186	18.0%	6.89	25

Table 21*Autism Support Program Enrollment: Age Range*

Age	Frequency	Percent	Mean	No Response
<18	1	.2%	.06	34
18-19	181	33.7%	8.62	32
20-21	185	34.5%	8.81	32
22-23	123	22.9%	5.86	32
24-25	35	6.5%	1.75	33
>25	12	2.2%	.67	35

Table 22*Autism Support Program Enrollment: College Classification*

Classification	Frequency	Percent	Mean	No Response
Concurrent (HS)	0	0%	0	32
Freshman ^a	322	33.9%	11.93	26
Sophomore ^b	229	24.1%	8.48	26
Junior ^c	195	20.6%	7.80	28
Senior ^d	183	19.3%	6.78	26
Grad Student	20	2.1%	9.52	32

^a Typically less than 30 college credit hours

^b Typically 30-60 college credit hours

^c Typically 61-90 college credit hours

^d Typically greater than 90 college credit hours

Table 23*Autism Support Program Admissions Requirements*

Component	Not Required	Optional	Required	No Response
Age Cutoff	36 (87.8%)	4 (9.8%)	1 (2.4%)	11
Application Fee	36 (87.8%)	1 (2.4%)	4 (9.8%)	11
Essay/Personal Statement	33 (80.5%)	3 (7.3%)	5 (12.2%)	11
GPA Requirement	31 (75.6%)	5 (12.2%)	5 (12.2%)	11
High School IEP/504 Plan	19 (46.3%)	10 (24.4%)	12 (29.3%)	11
Interview	12 (29.3%)	4 (9.8%)	25 (61.0%)	11
IQ Cutoff	34 (82.9%)	5 (12.2%)	2 (4.9%)	11
Letter(s) of Recommendation	33 (80.5%)	3 (7.3%)	5 (12.2%)	11
Parent Short-Answer Questions	26 (63.4%)	9 (22.0%)	6 (14.6%)	11
Picture	37 (90.2%)	3 (7.3%)	1 (2.4%)	11
Program-Specific Application	8 (40.0%)	5 (25.0%)	7 (35.0%)	32
Proof of Admission to Institution	6 (14.6%)	-	35 (85.4%)	11
Proof of Diagnosis	14 (34.1%)	10 (24.4%)	17 (41.5%)	11
Psych Eval	15 (36.6%)	13 (31.7%)	13 (31.7%)	11
Registration with DRC	17 (42.5%)	13 (32.5%)	10 (25.0%)	12
Student Short-Answer Questions	18 (43.9%)	6 (14.6%)	17 (42.5%)	11
Transcripts	22 (53.7%)	6 (14.6%)	13 (31.7%)	11
Video Statement	37 (92.5%)	3 (7.5%)	-	12
Other	8 (44.4%)	3 (16.7%)	7 (38.9%)	34

Note. Percentages calculated out of the total number of responses for each individual component

Table 24*Providers of Supports and Services*

Service	Other Dept	ASP	ASP & Other Dept	Not Provided	No Response
Academic accommodations					
Total	35 (89.7%)	4 (10.3%)	-	-	13
Unique	-	-			
Alternate proctored testing site					
Total	35 (89.8%)	4 (12.9%)	1	-	13
Unique	34 (87.2%)	3 (7.7%)			
Employment/career skills development					
Total	29 (74.4%)	24 (61.5%)	14	-	13
Unique	15 (38.5%)	10 (25.6%)			
Executive functioning coaching					
Total	10 (25.7%)	33 (84.6%)	6	2 (5.1%)	13
Unique	4 (10.3%)	27 (69.2%)			
Faculty mentors					
Total	18 (46.1%)	9 (23.0%)	2	14 (35.9%)	13
Unique	16 (41.0%)	7 (7.9%)			
Housing accommodations					
Total	32 (82.0%)	8 (20.5%)	2	1 (2.6%)	13
Unique	30 (76.9%)	6 (15.4%)			
Independent living skills development/instruction					
Total	8 (20.5%)	26 (66.6%)	2	7 (17.9%)	13
Unique	6 (15.4%)	24 (61.5%)			
Individual meetings					
Total	8 (21.1%)	35 (92.1%)	6	-	14
Unique	2 (5.3%)	29 (76.3%)			
Internships					
Total	30 (76.9%)	12 (30.8%)	7	6 (15.4%)	13
Unique	23 (59.0%)	5 (12.8%)			
Life coaching					
Total	9 (23.1%)	21 (53.9%)	4	13 (33.3%)	13
Unique	5 (12.8%)	17 (43.6%)			
Mental health counseling					
Total	31 (79.5%)	9 (23.1%)	1	-	13
Unique	30 (76.9%)	8 (20.5%)			
Note taker					
Total	34 (87.2%)	3 (7.7%)	-	2 (5.1%)	13
Unique	-	-			
Peer mentors					
Total	13 (33.3%)	29 (74.3%)	7	4 (10.3%)	13
Unique	6 (15.4%)	22 (56.4%)			

Table 24 continued*Providers of Supports and Services*

Person-centered planning					
Total	7 (17.9%)	31 (79.5%)	2	3 (7.7%)	13
Unique	5 (12.8%)	29 (74.4%)			
Proctored study hall					
Total	11 (28.2%)	17 (43.6%)	3	14 (35.9%)	13
Unique	8 (20.5%)	14 (35.9%)			
Program-specific courses					
Total	10 (26.3%)	13 (34.2%)	-	15 (39.5%)	14
Unique	-	-			
Social activities					
Total	16 (41.0%)	36 (92.3%)	14	1 (2.6%)	13
Unique	2 (5.1%)	22 (56.4%)			
Social skills instruction					
Total	9 (23.0%)	32 (82.0%)	2	7 (17.9%)	13
Unique	7 (17.9%)	30 (76.9%)			
Summer transition program					
Total	9 (23.7%)	12 (31.5%)	1	18 (47.4%)	14
Unique	8 (21.1%)	11 (29.0%)			
Tutoring					
Total	38 (97.4%)	4 (10.3%)	3	-	13
Unique	35 (89.7%)	1 (1.6%)			
Workshops/seminars					
Total	24 (63.1%)	25 (65.7%)	14	3 (7.9%)	14
Unique	10 (26.3%)	11 (28.9%)			
Other	12 (66.7%)	6 (33.3%)	-	-	34

Table 25*Autism Support Program: Tiered Supports Provided*

Tiered Supports	Frequency	Percent
No	17	42.5%
Yes	23	57.5%
No Response	12	-

Table 26*Autism Support Program: Tiered Support Model*

Tiered Support Model	Frequency	Percent
Graduated, with fee ^a	9	37.5%
Graduated, no fee ^b	7	29.2%
Increasing ^c	4	16.7%
Other	4	16.7%
No Response	29	-

^a Higher initial fee that is reduced as support needs decrease

^b Supports are free but tapered as needs decrease

^c Basic supports are free; intensive supports are offered for a fee

Table 27*Interview Participants: Autism Support Program Offerings*

Program Offering	Frequency	Percent
Employment/Career Skills Development	4	66.7%
Executive Functioning Coaching	6	100%
Faculty Mentors	1	16.7%
Housing Accommodations		
Independent Living Skills/ Instruction	5	83.3%
Individual Meetings	6	100%
Internships	2	33.3%
Life Coaching	2	33.3%
Mental Health Counseling	1	16.7%
Person-Centered-Planning	5	83.3%
Peer Mentors	5	83.3%
Proctored Study Halls	5	83.3%
Program-Specific Courses	1	16.7%
Sensory Lounge	1	16.7%
Social Activities	6	100%
Social Skills Instruction	6	100%
Summer Transition Program	4	66.7%
Tutoring Assistance	1	16.7%
Workshops and Seminars	4	66.7%

Table 28*Autism Support Program: Funding Sources*

Funding Source	Frequency	Percent
Institutional Funds	17	43.6%
Grants	15	38.5%
Department of Rehabilitative Services	14	35.9%
State Funds	5	12.8%
Program Fees	23	59.0%
Donations/Endowment	9	23.1%
Other	4	10.3%
No Response	13	-

Note. The percentages do not add up to 100% due to the ability for participants to choose more than one funding source, leading to multiple combinations of funding sources given for each individual response.

Table 29*Autism Support Program: Program Fee per Semester*

Fee	Frequency	Percent
<\$1,000	2	9%
\$1,000-\$1,999	4	18%
\$2,000-\$2,999	2	9%
\$3,000-\$3,999	6	27%
\$4,000-\$5,000	6	27%
>\$5,000	2	9%
No Response	30	-

Table 30*Autism Support Program: Program Fee Scholarships*

Scholarship Offered	Frequency	Percent
No	10	45.5%
Yes	12	54.5%
No Response	30	-

Table 31*Autism Support Program: Collaboration with Department of Rehabilitative Services*

DRS Contract	Frequency	Percent
No	10	47.6%
Yes	11	52.4%
No Response	31	-

Table 32*Autism Support Program: Department of Rehabilitative Services Financial Support Levels*

DRS Level of Support	Frequency	Percent
Partial Amount	3	27.3%
Full Amount	8	72.7%
No Response	41	-

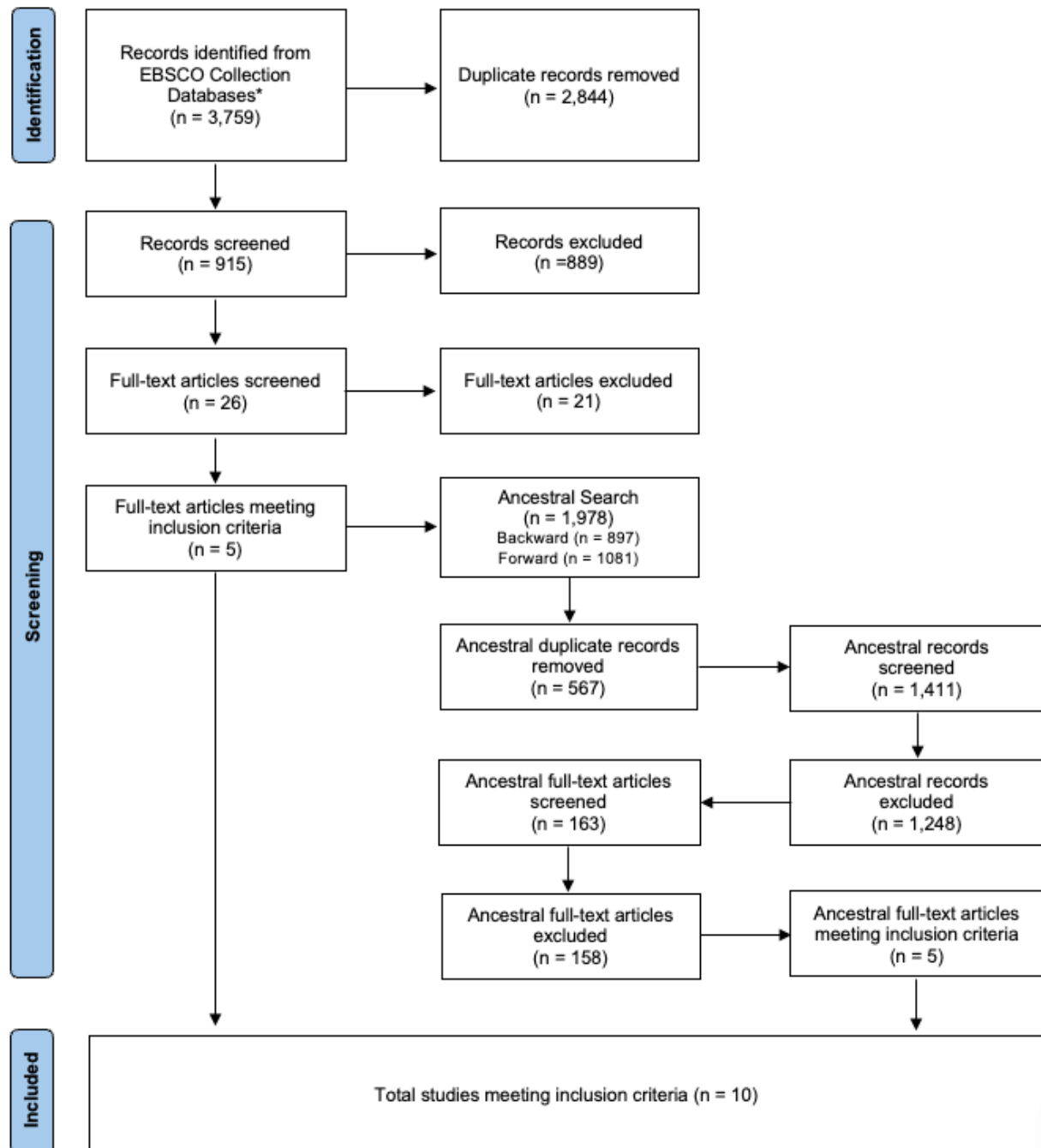
Table 33*Autism Support Program: Program Metrics*

Program Metric	Frequency	Percent
Grade Point Average	26	68.4%
Graduation Rates	31	81.6%
Parent Satisfaction	9	23.7%
Employment (General)	17	44.7%
Employment (Major-Specific)	8	21.1%
Retention Rate (Institution)	22	57.9%
Retention Rate (Program)	30	78.9%
Student Goal Achievement	25	65.8%
Student Satisfaction	32	84.2%
No Response	14	-

Note. The percentages do not add up to 100% due to the ability for participants to choose more than one program metric, leading to multiple combinations of program metrics given for each individual response.

Figure 1

PRISMA Diagram of the Search and Screening Process for Articles Included in the Systematic Review of the Literature



Note. The model was created under the PRISMA 2020 statement guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

^a EBSCO Collection Databases (n = 88; see Appendix A)

Appendix A

Databases Searched within EBSCO Collection

Academic Search Complete	Business Source Elite
Academic Search Elite	CINAHL Complete
Academic Search Premier	Communication Source
America: History & Life	Computer Source
American Antiquarian Society (AAS)	Consumer Health Reference eBook
Historical Periodicals Collection: Series 1	Collection
American Antiquarian Society (AAS)	eBook Collection (EBSCOHost)
Historical Periodicals Collection: Series 2	
American Antiquarian Society (AAS)	eBook Open Access (OA) Collection
Historical Periodicals Collection: Series 3	(EBSCOHost)
American Antiquarian Society (AAS)	Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson)
Historical Periodicals Collection: Series 4	
American Antiquarian Society (AAS)	Education Index Retrospective: 1929-1983
Historical Periodicals Collection: Series 5	(H.W. Wilson)
American Bibliography of Slavic, East	ERIC
European, and Eurasian Studies	
Anthropology Plus	Exploring Race in Society
Applied Science & Technology Index	Film & Television Literature Index
Retrospective: 1913-1983 (H.W. Wilson)	
Art Index (H.W. Wilson)	Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia
Art Index Retrospective (H.W. Wilson)	GreenFILE
Associates Programs Source	Health Source – Consumer Edition
Atla Historical Monographs Collection:	Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition
Series 1	
Atla Historical Monographs Collection:	Historical Abstracts
Series 2	
Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials	History of Science, Technology and Medicine
Bibliography of Asian Studies	Hobbies & Crafts Source
Bibliography of Indigenous Peoples in North	Hobbies & Crafts Source eBook Subscription
America	(EBSCOHost)
Book Collection Nonfiction: Elementary	Home Improvement Source
School Edition	
Book Collection Nonfiction: High School	Home Improvement Source eBook
Edition	Subscription (EBSCOHost)
Book Collection Nonfiction: Middle School	Humanities & Social Sciences Index
Edition	Retrospective: 1907-1984 (H.W. Wilson)
Library Literature & Information Science Full	Index to Legal Periodicals and Books (H.W.
Text (H.W. Wilson)	Wilson)
Library, Information Science & Technology	International Bibliography of Theater &
Abstracts	Dance with Full Text
MAS Complete	Iter Bibliography
MAS Reference eBook Collection	Legal Collection

MasterFILE Complete	Professional Development Collection
MasterFILE Premier Reference eBook	Psychology and Behavioral Sciences
Subscription (EBSCOHost)	Collection
MEDLINE	Readers' Guide Retrospective: 1890-1982
	(H.W. Wilson)
Mental Measurements Yearbook with Tests in	Regional Business News
Print	
Middle Search Plus	Regional Business News Plus
Middle Search Reference eBook Collection	Religion and Philosophy Collection
Military & Government Collection	RILM Abstracts of Music Literature
MLA Directory of Periodicals	Small Business Source
MLA International Bibliography	Small Business Source eBook Subscription
	(EBSCOHost)
Music Index	Social Work Abstracts
Newspaper Source Plus	SocINDEX
Newswires	Sociological Collection
Petroleum Abstracts TULSA® Database	SPORTDiscus with Full Text
Primary Search	The National Review Archive
Legal Information Source	The New Republic Archive
Primary Search Reference eBook Collection	TOPICsearch

Appendix B

Codebook: Systematic Review of the Literature

Participants

Student Characteristics

- Total number of autistic students participating in the study
- Inclusion criteria
- Exclusion criteria
- Location/setting
- College level classification
- Gender
- Race/Ethnicity
- Age
- Degree Program

Program Characteristics

- Total number of programs participating in the study
- Department under which programs are housed
- Inclusion criteria for the study
- Exclusion criteria for the study
- Inclusion criteria for participating programs
- Exclusion criteria for participating programs
- Diagnoses supported by participating programs
- Program fee structure
- Supported areas of need
- Location/setting of participating programs
- Number of students served
- College level classification of students served
- Gender of students served
- Race/Ethnicity of students served
- Age of students served
- Degree Programs of students served

Study Characteristics

- Recruitment Methods
- Research Questions

Methodology

- Survey
- Qualitative
- Practice Brief

Study Quality

- Survey (Protogerou & Hagger, 2020)

Qualitative (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Garwood et al., 2023; Trainor et al., 2014)

Study Findings

General Experiences*

Academics

Social

Independent Living

Career Development

Self-Determination Skills

Mental Health/Comorbid Diagnosis*

Sensory*

Disclosure of Diagnosis*

Parental Support/Involvement*

External Supports*

Autism Support Programs

General Observations*

Implications

Recommendations

Practice

Research

Limitations

Funding Source

*Denotes code that emerged from a review of the literature

Appendix C

Study Recruitment Email – Survey and Interview

Subject: Dissertation Data Collection – Autism Support Programs in Higher Education

Hello!

My name is Angela Barbour, and I am the Director of the autism support program for degree-seeking students at the University of Oklahoma, SPARK360. I am in the final stages of my doctoral program in Special Education, and I am respectfully requesting your participation in my dissertation research.

I am conducting a survey of autism support program administrators at four-year universities in the US to explore what and how supports and services are being offered through these programs. The survey consists of 24 items and is estimated to take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Respondents who take the survey to completion will be given the opportunity to be entered to win one of three \$30 Amazon gift cards.

At the end of the survey, respondents will be asked to participate in a follow-up interview to elaborate on how and why services/supports were chosen and to identify the most and least beneficial services/supports. Interviews will be scheduled for 60 minutes and may be conducted via Zoom or phone, with questions provided in advance. Interview participants will be compensated with a \$40 Amazon gift card.

Participation in the interview portion of the study is entirely voluntary and is not required to enter the drawing. All survey and interview responses will be kept confidential.

If you wish to participate in this study, please [click on this link](#) to be taken to the online survey. For questions regarding the study, please contact Angela Barbour at angela.barbour@ou.edu or Dr. Mary Barczak at mary.barczak@ou.edu.

Thank you so much for your assistance with my dissertation and for contributing to the limited knowledge base surrounding these valuable and vital programs.

Appendix D
Study Recruitment Email – Survey Only

Subject: Dissertation Data Collection – Autism Support Programs in Higher Education

Hello!

My name is Angela Barbour, and I am the Director of the autism support program for degree-seeking students at the University of Oklahoma, SPARK360. I am in the final stages of my doctoral program in Special Education, and I am respectfully requesting your participation in my dissertation research.

I am conducting a survey of autism support program administrators at four-year universities in the US to explore what and how supports and services are being offered through these programs. The survey consists of 24 items and is estimated to take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Respondents who take the survey to completion will be given the opportunity to be entered to win one of three \$30 Amazon gift cards.

If you wish to participate in this study, please [click on this link](#) to be taken to the online survey. For questions regarding the study, please contact Angela Barbour at angela.barbour@ou.edu or Dr. Mary Barczak at mary.barczak@ou.edu.

Thank you so much for your assistance with my dissertation and for contributing to the limited knowledge base surrounding these valuable and vital programs.

Appendix E
Study Recruitment Email – Interview Only

Subject: Dissertation Study – Autism Support Programs in Higher Education

Hello!

My name is Angela Barbour, and I am the Director of the autism support program for degree-seeking students at the University of Oklahoma, SPARK360. I am in the final stages of my doctoral program in Special Education, and I am respectfully requesting your participation in my dissertation research. Participants will have the opportunity to receive up to \$90 compensation for their time.

I am conducting interviews to explore how and why services/supports were chosen and to identify the most and least beneficial services/supports. Interviews will be scheduled for 60 minutes and may be conducted via Zoom or phone, with questions provided in advance. All interview responses will be kept confidential.

Interview participants will be compensated with a \$50 Amazon gift card. Participants who complete a corresponding survey will be awarded an additional \$10 Amazon card and can be entered into a drawing to receive one of three \$30 Amazon gift cards.

If you wish to participate in this study, please [click on this link](#) to register for your interview. For questions regarding the study, please contact Angela Barbour at angela.barbour@ou.edu or Dr. Mary Barczak at mary.barczak@ou.edu.

Thank you so much for your assistance with my dissertation and for contributing to the limited knowledge base surrounding these valuable and vital programs.

Appendix F

Survey Protocol

A. General Institution Profile

1. Institution name
2. Type of institution
 - a. Public
 - b. Private
3. In what region of the United States is your institution located?
 - a. West (i.e., AK, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY)
 - b. Southwest (i.e., AZ, NM, OK, TX)
 - c. Midwest (i.e., IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI)
 - d. Northeast (i.e., CT, DE, MA, MD, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT)
 - e. Southeast (i.e., AL, AR, DC, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, WV)
4. Approximate undergraduate student enrollment at your institution
 - a. <1,000
 - b. 1,000-4,999
 - c. 5,000-9,999
 - d. 10,000-25,000
 - e. >25,000
5. Current enrollment for identified students with disabilities at your institution, if known (i.e., the approximate number of students registered with the institution's disability resource office for academic accommodations)
 - a. Unknown
 - b. <500
 - c. 500-999
 - d. 1,000-1,499
 - e. 1,500-2,000
 - f. >2,000
6. Total number of students with an ASD diagnosis currently enrolled at the institution, if known (i.e., the approximate number of autistic students registered with the institution's disability resource office for academic accommodations)
 - a. Unknown
 - b. <10
 - c. 10-49
 - d. 50-99
 - e. 100-200
 - f. >200

B. Support Program Application

(This question refers only to the application for the support program)

7. Please indicate whether each of the following elements is required, optional, or not required as part of the support program application.

- a. Age cutoff
- b. Application fee
- c. Essay/personal statement
- d. High school and/or other postsecondary institution transcripts
- e. High school IEP/504 plan
- f. Interview
- g. IQ requirement
- h. Letter(s) of recommendation
- i. Parent short-answer questions
- j. Picture
- k. Previous GPA requirement
- l. Proof of admission to the institution
- m. Proof of diagnosis
- n. Psychoeducational/neuropsychological evaluation
- o. Registration with the disability services office
- p. Student short-answer questions
- q. Video statement
- r. Other (please describe)
- s. We do not require a program-specific application

C. Support Program Profile

- 8. Number of program staff
 - a. Full-time:
 - b. Part-time:
 - c. Graduate Assistants:
 - d. Interns:
 - e. Other: (please describe)
- 9. Number of autistic students participating in your support program
 - a. <5
 - b. 5-9
 - c. 10-19
 - d. 20-30
 - e. >30
- 10. When was your program established?
 - a. <1 year ago
 - b. 1-2 years ago
 - c. 2-3 years ago
 - d. 3-5 years ago
 - e. >5 years ago
- 11. Does your program serve other disabilities in addition to ASD?
 - a. No
 - b. Yes (please describe)

D. Support Program Participant Demographics

(Please indicate the number of autistic students in your support program within each category)

12. Race/Ethnicity (students may fall under more than one category)

- a. White
- b. Black/African American
- c. Hispanic/Latinx
- d. Indigenous/Native American
- e. Asian/Pacific Islander
- f. Middle Eastern
- g. Other
- h. Unknown

13. Gender

- a. Male
- b. Female
- c. Non-binary

14. Age

- a. <18
- b. 18-19
- c. 20-21
- d. 22-23
- e. 24-25
- f. >25

15. Institutional Classification

- a. Concurrent high school students
- b. Freshmen (typically <30 hours)
- c. Sophomores (typically 30-60 hours)
- d. Juniors (typically 61-90 hours)
- e. Seniors (typically >90 hours)
- f. Graduate students

E. Student Supports and Services

16. Please indicate whether each of the following supports is provided directly by the support program, by a different entity within your institution, or is not provided at your institution. Check all that apply for each service/support.

- a. Academic accommodations
- b. Alternate proctored testing site
- c. Employment skills development
- d. Executive functioning coaching
- e. Faculty mentors
- f. Housing accommodations
- g. Independent living skills development/instruction
- h. Individual meetings (1:1)

- i. Internships
 - j. Life Coaching
 - k. Mental health counseling
 - l. Note taker
 - m. Peer mentors
 - n. Person-centered planning
 - o. Proctored study hall
 - p. Program-specific courses
 - q. Social activities
 - r. Social skills instruction
 - s. Summer transition program for incoming first-year students
 - t. Technology supports (e.g., Dragon NaturallySpeaking, smart pen, tablet)
 - u. Tutoring
 - v. Workshops/seminars
 - w. Other (please describe)
17. Do you provide tiered supports? (i.e., different levels of support based on need)
- a. No
 - b. Yes
- [If “yes” is selected]
18. Which model do you use?
- a. Increasing (free basic supports, fee-for-service intensive supports)
 - b. Graduated (higher initial fee that is reduced as support needs decrease)
 - c. Both
 - d. Other (please describe)

F. Support Program Funding

19. Program funding source(s)—Check ALL that apply
- a. Institutional funds
 - b. Grants
 - c. Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS)
 - d. State funds
 - e. Program fees
 - f. Other (please describe)
- [If “program fees” is selected]
20. What is the program fee per semester?
- a. <\$1,000
 - b. \$1,000-\$1,999
 - c. \$2,000-\$2,999
 - d. \$3,000-\$3,999
 - e. \$4,000-\$5,000
 - f. >\$5,000
21. Do you offer scholarships for the program fee?
- a. No
 - b. Yes

22. Do you have a contract with the Department of Rehabilitative Services to pay the program fee for eligible students?

- a. No
- b. Yes

[If “yes” is selected]

23. How much of the fee is covered?

- a. Full amount
- b. Partial (please describe)

G. Support Program Metrics

24. What data do you collect to determine program success? (Check all that apply)

- a. Individual student GPA
- b. Graduation rates
- c. Parent satisfaction
- d. Post-graduation employment in general
- e. Post-graduation employment within the student’s major
- f. Retention rate (institution)
- g. Retention rate (program)
- h. Student goal achievement
- i. Student satisfaction

Note: Adapted with permission from G. Barnhill (2016)

Appendix G

Interview Questions

1. In your survey, you indicated you offer XYZ supports. Will you please elaborate on what those look like?
 - a. Why these supports?
 - b. I noticed you mentioned ... on your website—do you still offer that? [in the event support(s) were not indicated on the survey]
 - c. You indicated ____ on the survey, but your program website describes ____; what is the story there? [if any survey responses differ from the information provided on the website]
2. How did/do you decide which services to provide?
 - a. Who is involved in the decision-making?
 - b. Are there supports you want to provide, but are unable to?
 - i. What would allow you to provide those supports?
 - c. What barriers to providing services have you encountered?
 - d. How/have these barriers impacted the supports you provide?
 - e. I saw on your website that your mission statement/purpose states _____. Can you tell me more about that? [in the event this is not addressed through answers to the preceding questions]
3. What practices have you found to be most beneficial for program participants?
 - a. How were the practices/supports beneficial
 - b. How do you decide if a support/practice is beneficial?
 - c. Do you solicit feedback, and if so, from whom?
4. What practices have you found to be least beneficial for program participants?
 - a. How were the practices/supports not beneficial?
 - b. How/did you adapt the practice/support? Did that help?

Appendix H

Website Review

1. Program Purpose
2. Mission Statement
3. Provided services/supports
4. Program specifics
 - a. Program fee
 - b. Tiered supports
 - c. Admissions requirements

Appendix I

Codebook: Research Study

- A. Research Question One
 - 1. Services and Supports
 - a. Academic Services & Supports
 - b. Career Development/ Employment Skills Services & Supports
 - c. Independent Living Services & Supports
 - d. Mental Health Services & Supports
 - e. Person-Centered-Planning
 - f. Peer Mentoring
 - g. Dedicated Program Space
 - h. Social Services & Supports
 - i. Workshops/Program-Specific Courses
 - 2. Program Expectations
 - 3. Funding Source(s)
- B. Research Question Two
 - 1. Decision-Making Processes
 - a. Decision-Maker(s)
 - b. Direct and Indirect Feedback
 - c. Involvement with National Professional Organizations
 - d. Other Autism Support Programs
 - e. Partnerships with Vocational Rehabilitation
 - f. Review of the Literature
 - 2. Collaboration with Stakeholders
 - a. Collaboration with Campus Stakeholders
 - i. Career Services
 - ii. Disability Services
 - iii. Campus Housing
 - iv. Professional Programs
 - v. Tutoring Resources
 - b. Collaboration with Students' Parents
 - 3. Barriers to Providing Services
 - a. External Barriers
 - b. Institutional Barriers
 - c. Lack of Student Engagement
 - d. Lack of Staffing
 - e. Concerns Regarding Funding
 - f. Concerns Regarding Space
- C. Research Question Three
 - 1. Program Effectiveness
 - a. Beneficial Practices
 - i. Individual Meetings between student and mentor/coach
 - ii. Peer Mentoring
 - iii. Social Events
 - iv. Relationships with Faculty
 - v. Dedicated Program Space
 - vi. Avenues for Non-Verbal Communication
 - vii. Transparency in Communication
 - viii. Therapy
 - b. Less Beneficial Practices
 - c. Future Directions