

EMBRACING DIVERSE THINKERS: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING THE GRADUATION
RATES FROM A HIGH AUTISM COLLEGE STUDENT POPULATION

by

Beverly Austin Donovan

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University

2023

EMBRACING DIVERSE THINKERS: A CASE STUDY EXAMINING THE GRADUATION
RATES FROM A HIGH AUTISM COLLEGE STUDENT POPULATION

by Beverly Austin Donovan

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2023

APPROVED BY:

Andrea Bruce, Ed. D., Committee Chair

Floralba Marrero, Ed. D Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. The case study answers the following central question: CQ) How does Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generate high graduation rates for its autistic student population? The intrinsic case design focused on the case itself; Alpha College observes uniquely high graduation rates of autistic students. This study was guided by Blume and Singers' social stigma theory and Goffman's neurodiversity theory. Data were collected through interviews, document analysis, and a focus group. Pseudonyms were used for interviews and focus group participants. Triangulation was achieved with audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, and analytical memoing. Data were synthesized using Yin's components of single-case research, Stake's interview transcription technique, and Saldaña's Eclectic Codes. Results showed two key themes holistic education and faculty support. The implications of this case study pertain to policy and practice. Implications of the study impact policy pertaining to federal guidelines to better meet the needs of the autistic student population in higher education and the infrastructure of conventional university support programs, resources, and pedagogy. Implications call for a transformative shift in perception and action. Perception affects change in action, resulting in more effective supports, and services, leading to higher graduation rates for autistic students nationwide.

Keywords: autism, higher education, graduation, and inclusion

Copyright Page

Copyright 2023, Beverly Donovan

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my creator; with him, all things are possible.

I tribute this dissertation to two critical undergraduate professors at Roanoke, Dr. Leeson and Dr. Miller. You nurtured a love for learning and believed in me at a time in my life I was most lost; because of you, I discovered myself. To the two most influential graduate professors from Iona, Dr. Stratton, you inspired me, uplifted me, believed, and showed me that my passion and drive would take me farther than I could imagine. You broadened my views, asked me to question what I thought I knew, and softened my heart to make space for more diverse and analytical thinking. I cherish your feisty spirit, gumption, cheeky quips, and strong confidence, so naturally, you draw it out of your students. Dr. Hughes, you challenged and pushed me by never accepting mediocrity, yet you treated me as a viable peer with a voice worth hearing. I will always cherish the historic “shop-talk” you so graciously indulged with a little ‘ol graduate student.

To my parents, who taught me discipline and courage at an earlier age.

To my children, Annabelle, and Jack, may you pursue God’s will, your dreams, knowledge, and continuous learning throughout your lives.

To my husband, who believed in me as a nervous undergraduate and supported our family and me through graduate and post-graduate school, all while serving this country and pursuing his own higher education. You are certainly one-in-a-million Donovan.

Forever thine, Forever mine, Forever ours, February 8th, 2012 (Beethoven, 1812).

Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge my husband, John, for your steadfast strength, for the occasional but necessary tough love, and for the gentle hand to wipe my tears when I thought I could not go on. My children, Jack and Annabelle, you are the beat in my heart, the passion and drive behind these words, the purpose, and the cause. For you, I will not stop nor yield till the world sees the beauty of your minds and the light you both shine. Mom, this is for you, for all the sacrifices, toiling, and tears, but mainly for the grace, humility, joy, and courage, as God's warrior, you continue to teach me. Pop, this is for the discipline and drive you have instilled in me. You have always pushed me to do and be more than the world or even thought I could.

My chair, Dr. Bruce, has been a true mentor, spiritual leader, sounding board, guide, and sister in Christ throughout this journey. Without her wisdom, true belief, and faith in God and me, I and this dissertation would be lost. Dr. Marrero, my second reader, methodologist, and eye in the sky. After months of writing, reading, editing, re-reading, and re-editing, you shined a light on the blind shots so that I could see my work more clearly and through a different lens. Your fresh perspective challenged me to return to the roots of my study and examine its core focus, purpose, and goals so that my work echoed clarity; thank you will never be enough for breathing life back into this labor of love. We did it!

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Copyright Page.....	4
Dedication.....	5
Acknowledgments.....	6
Table of Contents.....	7
List of Tables.....	12
List of Figures.....	13
List of Abbreviations.....	14
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	15
Overview.....	15
Background.....	15
Historical Context.....	16
Social Context.....	17
Theoretical Context.....	19
Problem Statement.....	22
Purpose Statement.....	23
Significance of the Study.....	24
Research Questions.....	27
Central Research Question.....	28
Sub-Question One.....	28
Sub-Question Two.....	29
Sub-Question Three.....	30
Definitions.....	31

Summary32

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW34

 Overview.....34

 Theoretical Framework.....34

 Summary64

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS67

 Overview.....67

 Research Design.....67

 Research Questions69

 Central Research Question.....70

 Sub-Question One.....70

 Sub-Question Two70

 Sub-Question Three70

 Setting and Participants.....70

 Site71

 Participants.....72

 Researcher Positionality.....73

 Interpretive Framework74

 Philosophical Assumptions.....75

 Researcher’s Role77

 Procedures.....78

 Permissions78

 Recruitment Plan.....78

 Data Collection Plan80

Document Analysis Plan.....	81
Individual Interview Plan.....	83
Focus Group Plan.....	89
Data Synthesis.....	92
Trustworthiness.....	93
Credibility	94
Transferability.....	94
Dependability	94
Confirmability.....	95
Ethical Considerations	95
Summary	96
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	98
Overview.....	98
Participants.....	98
Results.....	101
Holistic Education.....	105
Faculty Support.....	113
Outlier Findings	120
Research Question Responses.....	122
Central Research Question.....	122
Sub-Question One.....	123
Sub-Question Two	125
Sub-Question Three	127
Summary.....	130

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION.....	132
Overview.....	132
Discussion.....	132
Interpretation of Findings	132
Summary of Thematic Findings.....	133
Perception	134
Action.....	135
Alpha College Findings	135
Model	136
Pedagogy.....	137
Faculty.....	139
Supports	141
Implications for Policy or Practice	144
Implications for Policy.....	144
Implications for Practice	145
Empirical Implications.....	147
Limitations and Delimitations.....	150
Recommendations for Future Research	151
Conclusion	152
References.....	154
Appendix A: Liberty University IRB Approval Letter.....	179
Appendix B: Alpha College IRB Approval Letter	180
Appendix C: Consent Form	180
Appendix D: Interview Semi- Structured Questions	184

Appendix E: Focus Group Semi-Structured Questions	186
Appendix F: Document Analysis Inquiry Email	187
Appendix G: Participant Pseudonym Key: Individual Interview Group	189
Appendix H: Participant Pseudonym Key: Focus Group	189
Appendix I: Individual Interview Data Analysis Spreadsheet.....	190
Appendix J: Focus Group Data Analysis Spreadsheet	191
Appendix K: Document Analysis Spreadsheet.....	192
Appendix L: Professional Development Training Documentation Data Sample	193
Appendix M: Partial Professional Development Training Schedule and Topics Sample	195
Appendix N: Transcribed Individual Interview Data Sample	196
Appendix O: Example of Professional Development PowerPoint	197

List of Tables

Table 1. Individual Interview Participants.....	103
Table 2. Focus Group Participants.....	104
Table 3. Research Questions Thematic Alignment.....	106

List of Figures

Figure 1. Participant Overview	101
Figure 2. Components of Holistic Learning.....	141
Figure 3. Components of Effective Supports for Students at Alpha College.....	146
Figure 4. Components of Effective Supports for Faculty and Support Staff at Alpha College...	147

List of Abbreviations

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Asperger's Syndrome (AS)

Disability Support Office (DSO)

Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID)

Student-Faculty Relationships (STRs)

National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

Intelligence Quotient (IQ)

Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Enrollment of autistic students in college is on the rise (Bakker et al., 2019; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Elias et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Shattuck et al., 2012; D. White et al., 2019; S. W. White et al., 2011; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Compared to their neurotypical peers, autistic students demonstrate higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates (Bakker et al., 2019; Clouder et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2018). Chapter One provides a sustenant background of the topic problem, the historical context of the problem, and the social contexts that impact the situation currently, and briefly illustrates the theoretical contexts guiding the framework of this study. The following section will include the problem statement, the purpose statement, the significance of the study, the central research question, the three sub-research questions, terms and definitions, and the chapter summary.

Background

The rise in neurodiverse diagnoses, like autism, means that post-secondary institutions need to evolve to include more inclusive social and academic support to ensure this population receives the support and resources they need to persist and complete their degree programs (Bakker et al., 2019; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Kim, 2021; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020; D. White et al., 2019). Reevaluating not only how colleges support but perceive, understand, instruct, involve, and enfranchise this budding student population is key to their success (Bakker et al., 2019; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Jackson et al., 2018; Kim, 2021; Kim & Yoon, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020; Viezel; et al., 2020; Vincent, 2019). Studies have connected multiple features such as perception (Cage & Howes, 2020; Elias et al., 2019; Nah & Tan, 2021), attitude (Chung et al., 2015; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Mulholland &

Cummin, 2016; Saade et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019), stigma (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019), knowledge (Crompton et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2018; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2019), training (Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020), mental health (Corrigan et al., 2005; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Jackson et al., 2018; Vincent, 2019), social isolation (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Marsack & Perry, 2018; Silva et al., 2020; 2019; Veelen et al., 2020), peer relationships (Crompton et al., 2020; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Jackson et al., 2018; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019); support programs (Jackson et al., 2018; Kim, 2021; Kim & Yoon, 2021; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Viesel; et al., 2020), pedagogy (Anderson et al. 2019; Cox et al., 2020; Walters, 2015), and student-faculty relationships (STRs) (Anderson et al., 2019; Elias et al., 2019; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; Zeedyk et al., 2019) as key elements that impact graduation rates for autistic and neurodiverse college students.

Historical Context

Increasingly over the past fifty years, colleges and universities have begun to enroll and support more students with various disabilities (Bakker et al., 2019; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Elias et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Shattuck et al., 2012; D. White et al., 2019; S. W. White et al., 2011; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Most of the changes have occurred as a response to human rights movements like the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which became the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvements Act of 2004 (Chung et al., 2015; IDEA, 2004; Viesel et al., 2020). These policies protect students' primary to secondary school rights, accommodations, and

equitable education but are not mandated to uphold by colleges, leaving vulnerable student populations at risk of dropout or disincentivized to enrollment (Chung et al., 2015; IDEA, 2004; Viesel et al., 2020). Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act offers some protection and assurance (ADA, 1990; Viesel et al., 2020), which requires post-secondary institutions to provide academic accommodation, dependent on their condition, impairments, and support needs for students with disabilities.

Political and legislative movements were also met by socio-political movements like Blume (1998) and Singer (1999), breathing life into theories and pedagogical techniques like educational inclusion and neurodiversity. As political, social, and theoretical minds began to progress and promote awareness and disabilities training, educational theory headed towards more collaborative and inclusive pedagogical techniques (Idol, 2006). The increase in ASD diagnosis, early intervention programs, and alternative therapies likewise promoted accessibility to higher education for students who, as of 2011, only 47% of college-age adults with ASD enrolled in a post-secondary institution within six years of graduating from high school (Baio et al., 2018; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Saade et al., 2020; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020). At the same time, only 45% of neurodiverse children will enroll in college or a vocational school in the next decade (Jackson et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2011; Sanford et al., 2011; Vincent, 2019).

Social Context

The academic and social transition into college life increases emotional, social, stress, time management, and intellectual demands despite the individual's neurotype (Barnhill, 2016; Cox et al., 2020). Autistic individuals have categorically struggled with social interactions, fluid living situations, acclimation to new routines, and unfamiliar environments (Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020). The struggles faced by autistic college students demonstrate a distinct disadvantage from their neurotypical peers (Barnhill, 2016; Sasson et al., 2017; D. White et al.,

2019). Rising ASD diagnosis and improved early intervention mean that higher education is now more than ever a tangible reality for students with autism (Jackson et al., 2018; Maenner et al., 2020; Saade et al., 2020; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020). However, faculty and staff must be informed, knowledgeable, continually trained, and supported by the institution's infrastructure (Clouder et al., 2020). Support techniques, strategies, perceptions, and expectations should align to facilitate the most inclusive learning environment for a breadth of diverse learners, both neurotypical and neurodiverse (Clouder et al., 2020).

Perception and behavior play critical roles in how autism is supported in higher education (Cox et al., 2020). Autism has historically been viewed negatively, where stigmatization has become a recurrent theme (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). As autistic populations grow, there is a notable gap or laps in current and accurate knowledge about autism circulating among their college peer groups, the administration, support staff, and faculty members (Barnhill, 2016; see also Sasson et al., 2017; Viezel et al., 2020). The literature shows that the most frequently referenced graduation rates for autistic students are from 2011 (Cox et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2021; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Newman, 2011, Tipton & Blacher, 2014; Zeedyk et al., 2019). The lack of up-to-date graduation rates demonstrates a laps in informative awareness and continued research of this growing population (Kim & Crowley, 2021). Furthermore, pedagogical techniques often referenced, such as inclusion, facilitates academic retention (Bakker et al., 2019; Idol, 2006; Lai et al., 2020; Nah & Tan, 2021; Tubele et al., 2017; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; Walters, 2015) and promote academic success leading to increased graduation rates for neurodiverse student population (Bakker et al., 2019; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020). Additionally, academic achievement contributes to the overall well-being and quality of

life for all neurotypes, but specifically, in this case, autistic adults (Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Lai et al., 2020; Roll-Pettersson et al., 2020).

Theoretical Context

Neurodiversity began as a socio-political movement sparked by journalist Harvey Blume (1998) and academically cemented by social scientist and self-advocate Judy Singer in 1999. To Blume and Singer, neurodiversity represents the multiple and varying characteristics of an individual's neurological state, where all variations have strengths and are naturally occurring (Bakker et al., 2019; Cox et al., 2020; Dymond et al., 2017; Gobbo & Schmulsky, 2014; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). Neurodiversity found its roots as an educational theory through critical human rights policies like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) from the 1970s (Swain et al., 2012), the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Bolourian et al., 2018a; 2020), and inclusion education (Crockett & Kauffman, 1997). IDEA, LRE, and inclusion led to educators changing not only actions but perceptions about the value, capabilities, and best practices for educating students in special education programs (Bolourian et al., 2018a; 2020 Crockett & Kauffman, 1997; Idol, 2006; Nicolaidis et al., 2019).

Neurodiversity is a socio-political movement that evolved into an education theory that identifies the humanness in differing neurotypes to the conceptualization of neurodiversity in learning (Bakker et al., 2019; Dymond et al., 2017; Gobbo & Schmulsky, 2014; Singer, 1999). Neurodiversity further explains that neurodiverse differences should not discount academic potential but rather highlight a hidden populations' strengths and potential to contribute to academia (Bakker et al., 2019; Dymond et al., 2017; Gobbo & Schmulsky, 2014; Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). Neurodiversity encompasses multiple neurological conditions, including ASD, Asperger's Syndrome (AS), Dyslexia, and Dyspraxia (Clouder et al., 2020). Kapp et al. (2013) and Zeedyk et al. (2019) defined these neurological conditions as

variations in the natural “human genome” (p. 726). Neurodiversity is part of the individual's identity and represents a state or way of being (Singer, 1999). Throughout the literature, neurodiversity, and autism have gone hand in hand, where researchers have used neurodiversity as an umbrella term or as a synonym for spectrum disorders, including Asperger's (Bakker et al., 2019; Clouder et al., 2020; Dymond et al., 2017; Gobbo & Schmulsky, 2014; Kapp et al., 2013; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Zeedyk et al., 2019). However, it is essential to note that neurodiversity is an inclusive term; any findings, themes, supports, and resources gleaned from this study may or may not be beneficial to other neurological conditions. Here, researchers, geoscientists, and autistic academics Kingsbury et al. (2020) define autism as “an information processing condition that results in different sensory experiences and ways of thinking that departs from the ‘normal’ experience” (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, n.d.). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, neurodiversity was used in reference to autism.

Goffman's (1963) social stigma theory defines stigma as those attitudes and ideals that target and categorize an individual's nuanced characteristics as either within or outside the culturally and socially established norm. Social stigma theory sheds light on the movement perception is formulated (Goffman, 1963). It is vital to understand perception as it directly influences the outcomes of the initial meeting, evaluation, and categorization of the other individual or group of individuals during immediate and future encounters (Goffman, 1963). Perceptions turn to stigmas with replication or perceived replication of non-normative behavior or characteristics (Goffman, 1963). Stigma further impacts attitudes and behavior toward the “other” (Goffman, 1963, p. 1); in an educational setting, learning outcomes can be severely stifled or overly managed; either scenario impacts achievement and, eventually, graduation (Bakker et al., 2019; Cage & Howes, 2020; Chung et al., 2015; Elias et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Mulholland &

Cummin, 2016; Nah & Tan, 2021; Saade et al., 2020; Stockwell et al., 2020; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; D. White et al., 2019).

Action or behaviors influenced by perception can be understood by examining Goffman's (1963) work in social stigma theory. Goffman's (1963) theory sheds light on how perception and stigmas impact attitudes (Chung et al., 2015; Swain et al., 2012; D. White et al., 2019). Stigma manifests bias through the action or behaviors demonstrated by administrative, instructional, and support entities within the higher education system (Elias et al., 2019; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Nah & Tan, 2021). Stigmatized behaviors impede learning outcomes for autistic learners as they neglect to recognize, accommodate, or respect the abilities and value this sector of the student population has (Cage & Howes, 2020; Chung et al., 2015; Elias et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Mulholland & Cummin, 2016; Nah & Tan, 2021; Saade et al., 2020; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019).

Neurodiversity and social stigma theory serve as theoretical frameworks guiding this study. Neurodiversity finds that neurological developmental and learning differences are a human variant rather than a deficit (Barnhill, 2016; Blume, 1998; Clouder et al., 2020) that, when coupled with inclusive instruction (Caron et al., 2021; Idol, 2006), knowledge, and understanding, differences can mutually enrich social, emotional, and academic development and achievement for all types of learners (Clouder et al., 2020). Social stigma theory impacts how the perception of the neurodiverse influences stigmas, attitudes, and behavior, affecting student graduation rates (Chung et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Zeedyk et al., 2019). This study focused on the autism sub-section of the neurodiverse community, as they represent a quickly growing population of students entering higher education. The historic low graduation rates for the neurodiverse show that increased access is

not enough; support, inclusion, and accommodation are critical to degree completion and overall quality of life (Cage & Howes, 2020; Caron et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Mason et al., 2018; Roll-Pettersson et al., 2020). This study described Alpha College, an accredited southeastern four-year institution with a high neurodiverse enrollment rate and graduation rate. These features mark a distinct uniqueness to Alpha College and call for an in-depth case study to examine what Alpha College does to generate such promising results for neurodiverse learners.

Problem Statement

The problem is lower graduation rates for autistic and neurodiverse student populations enrolled in a post-secondary education program compared to their neurotypical peers (Bakker et al., 2019; Clouder et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2018; Vadjnal & Radoja, 2020). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2019), 40% of college students do not complete their degrees, meaning 60% complete their degree programs and graduate (Bryce et al., 2021). Sadly, the most current and frequently cited statistics are from 2011 and indicate that only 39% of autistic students graduate from college, compared to their neurotypical counterparts who demonstrated a 52.4% graduation rate in 2011 (Newman, 2011; Newman & Madaus, 2015; Petcu et al., 2021; White et al., 2016). Sparse and outdated numbers mean that the baseline to gauge the effectiveness of degree completion support programs does not fully reflect the current state of autism in higher education. Dated research statistics contribute to the existing gap and compound the problem: how does one improve graduation rates of autistic students when a current measure is missing?

Graduation rates for all students are impacted by multi-faceted elements like motivation, commitment, social relationships, communication, and executive functioning skills (Bakker et al., 2019; Bryce et al., 2021; Friedman & Mandel, 2009; 2010; Marques et al., 2017; Seirup &

Rose, 2011; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; Westrick et al., 2015). Executive functioning skills involve planning, organization, task initiation, higher-order cognitive processing, cognitive flexibility, self-monitoring, and working memory; all critically impact completion (Cage & Howes, 2020; Jackson et al., 2018; Viesel et al., 2020). Relationships between the autistic student and support staff (Jackson et al., 2018; Kim, 2021; Kim & Yoon, 2021; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; Viesel; et al., 2020), STRs (Anderson et al., 2019; Elias et al., 2019; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Zeedyk et al., 2019), peer-to-peer relationships (Crompton et al., 2020; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Jackson et al., 2018; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019), and negative perceptions impact dropout rates for autistic students. (DeBrabander et al., 2019; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020). These perceptions feed negative stigmas, biases, attitudes, and ultimately behaviors (Chung et al., 2015; Gray, 1993; Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019; Nah & Tan, 2021). Lastly, research has shown that positive perceptions of ASD facilitate positive social and academic outcomes (Crompton et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2018; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020; Tipton & Blacher, 2014; D. White et al., 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2019).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. At this stage in the research, high graduation rates for autistic college students were generally defined as the consecutive completion of an undergraduate degree at a post-secondary institution. This study aims to improve the current low graduation rates for autistic college students. Observing how and what a college does that demonstrates academic achievement for its autistic students and how it manages and overcomes the problematic elements that commonly lead to degree incompleteness

among autistic students provides an example of an effective model. The information gleaned from this study will inform future higher education institutions on what adaptive, inclusive, and neurodiverse education can achieve when perceptions are first informed by grace and love.

Significance of the Study

Polling from 2021 represented the entirety of Alpha College's student population. It showed that 60% of the students define themselves as various neurodiverse types or special needs, 10% identify as intellectually or emotionally challenged, and an additional 10% define themselves as unique learners. In comparison, 10% define themselves as average learners. Therefore, 80% of Alpha College's student population identified as neurodiverse learners. As of 2019, 48% of graduation rates were observed at Alpha College, of which 68% of the total graduating population were neurodiverse. Compared to the 38.8% national average graduation rate of autistic students (Bryce, 2021; Newman et al., 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2019), these numbers are staggering and indicate a need to investigate this unique case and get to the underbelly of how they can generate this academic success.

Understanding the key features that illustrate the theoretical underpinnings of the study, such as how a highly neurodiverse college effectively supports and enfranchises its autistic students, deepens, and expands the legitimacy of neurodiversity as a social movement. In this study to enfranchise refers to an investment in a community (Dictionary.com, 2023). Therefore, enfranchising autistic students in higher education is to invest in their education and well-being. Furthermore, this research provides levity to neurodiversity as an educational theory by gaining insight and understanding of how to increase graduation rates for the neurodiverse and the ASD student population (Cage et al., 2020). This study will additionally contribute to the theoretical underpinning of social stigma theory as it challenges the precedence of social stigma theory as the concept of "other" (Goffman, 1963, p. 1) as a neurodiverse outlier and aims to dismantle

confining social constructs by promoting respect, legitimacy, value, and acceptance of the “other” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020).

By studying social stigma theory and understanding how negative perception impacts behavior and attitude (Goffman, 1963), insight into how perception influences graduation rates of autistic college students were gleaned (Cage et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2015; Elias et al., 2019; Kim, 2021; Nah & Tan, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2020; 2019; Stockwell et al., 2020; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Unveiling how a successful institution perceives autistic students directly impacts their attitudes and ultimately drives their actions (Barnhill, 2016; Clouder et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2018; Cox et al., 2020; Elias & White, 2018; Gillespie- Lynch et al., 2015; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019; Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020; Sasson et al., 2017; Shackelford, 2020; Stockwell et al., 2020; Tipton & Blacher, 2014; Viesel et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019 & S. W. White et al., 2011). Action is the fulcrum for which enfranchisement hinges; there is only theory and sentimental platitudes without action.

The empirical significance of this study expanded upon the limited access data about current and existing graduation rates for autistic college students (Kim & Crowley, 2021). The literature has extensively explored the critical elements that influence ASD and neurodiverse post-secondary student graduation rates (Cage et al., 2020; Cage & Howes, 2020). The literature reflects examinations of singular features, like mental health (Jackson et al., 2018), isolation (Jansen et al., 2018) in isolation, as well as interlinked multi-feature studies, for example, how social and executive functioning challenges contribute to negative transitional experiences between high school and college (Nuske et al., 2019). This research contributes to the limited analysis of positive and negative experiences gleaned directly from autistic or neurodiverse students (Cage et al., 2020; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Nuske et al., 2019; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020;

Zeedyk et al., 2019). While these perspectives are critical in isolation, they do not paint the entire picture, adding to the benefit of a model case study, where all features can be viewed through a synchronous lens. Furthermore, the literature does not demonstrate an all-encompassing positive model example outside of the transitional phase into college, where dropout rates from the first year and graduation rates drive the research (Cage et al., 2020). Therefore, this intrinsic case study of Alpha College allows higher education, the ASD community, and neurodiverse advocates to see how all the features connect and influence academic outcomes under one lens.

The practical significance of this study generated additional knowledge and understanding significant to the achievement of the ASD community (Cage et al., 2020), parents, stakeholders, and advocates, colleges, universities, community colleges, vocational schools, Disability Service Offices (DSOs), Alpha College's faculty, support staff, and the administrative and support staff of the Transitional Program for neurodiverse learners. This study informs the participants about what they do and what they may improve or streamline. Outside observations and reflection can enlighten or illuminate a group or individuals of their blind spots.

Additionally, a non-biased examination of their program provided opportunities for staff and faculty to share ideas, communicate concerns, or find creative, modernized solutions to streamline planning and policy and omit redundancies to allow for more efficiency. On a grander scale, this study demonstrates to other colleges and universities wanting to improve graduation rates of their growing ASD student population a model to replicate or borrow from (Cage et al., 2020). Increased graduation rates contribute to the well-being and quality of life possible for the ASD population (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2020; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Lai et al., 2020; Roll-Pettersson et al., 2020).

As ASD diagnoses are on the rise (Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021), colleges, universities, and vocational schools are responsible for the enfranchisement of their current and

future student learners (Cage et al., 2020). Higher education levels improve employment opportunities, salaries, medical care, and quality of life (Caron et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2020; Ministère de la Santé et des Services Sociaux du Québec, 2016; Roll-Pettersson et al., 2020). It makes sense that these benefits would matriculate across all neurotypes despite some conflicting and ambiguous research that denotes existing neurodiverse employment inclusion services and programs as an insignificant indicator of one's quality of life (Cage & Howes, 2020; Caron et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2020, Nah & Tan, 2021; Roll-Pettersson et al., 2020). These findings contradict conventional thought but warrant notation as they contribute to research transparency and exhaustive literature analysis. Nonetheless, the current study aims to generate more progress toward increased access and inclusion in higher education for ASD in the community (Caron et al., 2021; Vadnjaj & Radoja, 2020). Experiences naturally create more opportunities; more opportunities create access, independence, choice, and joy, all features of an improved quality of life (Hong et al., 2016; Lai et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2018; Roll-Pettersson et al., 2020).

Research Questions

Dropout rates for autistic college students are higher than for neurotypical students. Similarly, graduation rates for autistic students are lower than their neurotypical peers (Clouder et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2018). Therefore, this research highlights the need to understand how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates such high graduation rates for its autistic student population.

Understanding how programs and activities are used to support autistic students effectively reflects the positive impact the theory of neurodiversity has had on higher education and the enfranchisement of this population (Anderson et al., 2019; Cage et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2021; Tipton & Blacher, 2014; Viezel et al., 2020). Additionally, understanding how perception and behavior contribute to a positive and supportive learning and social atmosphere

for autistic students reflects how social stigma theory can be overcome to create a model for successful academic outcomes for autistic college students (Barnhill, 2016; Bryce et al., 2021; Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Veelen et al., 2020). Furthermore, college leadership can benefit from replicating and adapting these existing factors to increase graduation rates at their institutions (Anderson et al., 2019; Cage & Howes, 2020; Clouder et al., 2020). Previous studies have examined the features that contribute to dropout rates for neurodiverse and autistic students as social-communicative (Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Tubele et al., 2017; Zeedyk et al., 2019), executive functioning (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2015), stigmatization (DeBrabander et al., 2019), and interpersonal (Elias et al., 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2019). The central research question and sub-questions for this study shed light on how one institution manages these challenges to promote the success of its autistic student population. These questions are based on the current literature on autism in higher education.

Central Research Question

How does Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generate high graduation rates for its autistic student population?

Sub-Question One

What support programs exist at Alpha College to effectively support graduation rates for its autistic student population?

The function of support programs in this sub-question is rooted in the theoretical framework as one of the key facets of the theory of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity in higher education seeks actionable support for the individual (Anderson et al., 2019; Cage et al., 2020; Clouder et al., 2020), educator (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Walters, 2015; Zeedyk et al., 2019), staff (Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021), and peer knowledge (D. White et al., 2019) and awareness training (Bryce et al., 2021; Cox et al., 2021; D. White et al., 2019). Academic and

social support programs may include peer molding programs (Clouder et al., 2020; Saade et al., 2020; Shackelford, 2010), D.S.O. autism knowledge assessment, and professional training (Clouder et al., 2020; Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021), faculty autism knowledge assessment and professional training (Anderson et al., 2019; Barnhill, 2016; Cox et al., 2021; Zeedyk et al., 2019), institution-wide academic and social policies that provide accommodation and resources for autistic students (Clouder et al., 2020; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020). Support programs have been found to promote graduation (Anderson et al., 2019; Clouder et al., 2020; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; Viesel et al., 2020; Zeedyk et al., 2019) and the well-being of the student (Clouder et al., 2020; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021), as this promotes the feeling of value and considered by the institution (Cage & Howes, 2020; Chung et al., 2015; Elias et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; 2020; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Mulholland & Cummin, 2016; Nah & Tan, 2021; Saade et al., 2020; Stockwell et al., 2020; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; D. White et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding what support programs exist at Alpha College informs them how they support and generate high graduation rates for autistic students.

Sub-Question Two

What activities exist at Alpha College to effectively support graduation rates for its autistic student population?

The function of activities in this sub-question is rooted in the theoretical framework as another key feature of the theory of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity in higher education and as a socio-political movement seeks to define autism as a naturally occurring accruing human variant (Barnhill, 2016; Blume, 1998, Goffman, 1963; Shackelford, 2010; Singer, 1999) with value and worthy of respect (Cage & Howes, 2020; Chung et al., 2015; Elias et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch

et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Mulholland & Cummin, 2016; Nah & Tan, 2021; Saade et al., 2020; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). Academic and social activities promote the inclusion of autistic students (Idol, 2006; Lai et al., 2020; Nah & Tan, 2021; Tubele et al., 2017; Walters, 2015)) that highlight their talents while fostering peer relationships and promoting self-worth through mental health (Corrigan et al., 2005; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Jackson et al., 2018; Vincent, 2019). These features increase the social and academic value and acceptance of autistic students (Kingsbury et al., 2020; Vadnjaj & Radoja, 2020). Social exclusion and academic isolation are noted factors in the literature to contribute to drop and low degree completion rates for autistic college students (Clouder et al., 2020; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Marsack & Perry, 2018; Silva et al., 2020; 2019; Veelen et al., 2020). Therefore, understanding what activities exist at Alpha College further informs how they support graduation rates for its autistic students.

Sub-Question Three

What perceptions about autism exist at Alpha College to effectively support graduation rates for its autistic student population?

The function of perception in this sub-question is rooted in the theoretical framework of social stigma theory. Social stigma theory seeks to understand how social identity is informed by perception and the norm (Goffman, 1963). Perceptions become socially generalized under stress, intensity, and replication (Goffman, 1963). Generalizations can span across a population or community forming stigmas. Stigmas can exist consciously or subconsciously (Goffman, 1963). In the literature, stigmatization is noted as a critical factor to drop out for autistic students in college (Chung et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding the state of the existing perception of autistic students at Alpha College informs how they manage stigma to promote graduation rates for autistic students.

Definitions

1. *Autism*- “Autism is a way of being. It is pervasive. It is not possible to separate the autism from the person—and if it were possible, the person you’d have left would not be the same person you started with” (Robertson & Ne’eman, 2008, p. 4)
 “According to the *Diagnostic and Statical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., text rev.: *DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association (APA0, 2000), ASDs are neurological conditions characterized by impairment in social, communication, and behavioral domain (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014, p. 14; APA, 2000).
2. *Graduation Rate*- “refers to a student’s ability to complete their degree or diploma program within a certain time frame” (Top Hat Glossary, 2022).
3. *Inclusion*- “the notion of inclusion entails a transformed view of (language) teaching. It requires us to replace conventional conceptualizations of individual differences in the regular classroom with a broader, organizational, 'social' or 'interactive' perspective relating to all aspects of schooling, including the infrastructure of buildings, financial resources, constructing school communities, and training of personnel” (Stadler-Heer, 2019).
4. *Neurodiversity*- “seeks to provide a culture wherein autistic people feel pride in a minority group identified and provide mutual support in self-advocacy as a community” (Kapp et al., 2013, p. 60; see also Baker, 2011; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012).
5. *Perception*- “transform[ation] [of] sensory messages into mental representations of external reality. It is neither passive nor completely reflective of reality. The environment is actively scanned for desired and/or anxiety-arousing objects. Unconscious bias and defense can creep into this process” (Weinberger et al., 2006).

6. *Culture*- “the way of life of a particular people, especially as shown in their ordinary behavior and habits, their attitudes toward each other, and their moral and religious beliefs” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022).
7. *Another*- “being one more in addition to one or more of the same kind (Merriam-Webster, 2023).

Summary

The problem is increased dropout rates and lower graduation rates for autistic students enrolled in post-secondary education programs compared to their neurotypical peers. It has been noted that low graduation rates for autistic college students are impacted by perception (Cage & Howes, 2020; Elias et al., 2019; Nah & Tan, 2021), attitude (Chung et al., 2015; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Mulholland & Cummin, 2016; Saade et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019), stigma (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019), knowledge (Crompton et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2018; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2019), training (Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020), mental health (Corrigan et al., 2005; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Jackson et al., 2018; Vincent, 2019), social isolation (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Marsack & Perry, 2018; Silva et al., 2020; 2019; Veelen et al., 2020), peer relationships (Crompton et al., 2020; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Jackson et al., 2018; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019); support programs (Jackson et al., 2018; Kim, 2021; Kim & Yoon, 2021; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Viesel; et al., 2020), pedagogy (Anderson et al. 2019; Cox et al., 2020; Walters, 2015), and student STRs (Anderson et al., 2019; Elias et al., 2019; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; Zeedyk et al., 2019). While these features have historically obstructed autistic students' ability to complete their degree programs, positive outcomes have been observed and

are emerging as more research and insight were gleaned from the examination of autism across the higher education paradigm (Cage et al., 2020; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Nuske et al., 2019; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020; Zeedyk et al., 2019).

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. This study demonstrated the theoretical underpinnings of neurodiversity and social stigma theory by describing how these social and educational theories impact academic achievement. Empirical significance expands upon existing research by describing a college model of academic success and the ability of higher education to adapt, overcome, and promote the value and success of all neuro types. Lastly, this study demonstrates its practice application as an intrinsic case study that takes an in-depth look at how a unique four-year college implements adaptive and inclusive programs, attitudes, supports, accommodations, and inclusion to enfranchise its highly neurodiverse student population. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how this college's system as a whole works asynchronously to generate markedly high graduation rates for autistic students. The goal of this study and its findings were to contribute to increased access to higher education and academic achievement while enrolled and a higher quality of life through employment and independent living upon graduation (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2018; Roll-Pettersson et al., 2020).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two is a systematic review of the current empirical literature on the key elements that impact graduation rates for autistic college students. Additionally, recent literature covering these elements that affect graduation rates for neurodiverse learners was included, as neurodiversity as a clinical term had ASD as one of its main conditions (Clouder et al., 2020). Due to the limited nature of specific literature addressing ASD dropout and graduation rates, insight was gleaned from broadening the research base to include neurodiversity. This chapter is organized to promote conceptualization of the scope and nature of social perceptions, stigmas, attitudes, and the resulting behaviors that impact graduation rates for autistic students in college. This literature review synthesizes stigma, autism, ASD in higher education, peer perception, faculty and staff perception, awareness and knowledge training, support programs and strategies, and purported insights into the research topic. Additional gaps reveal areas where perspectives regarding the ability of autistic college students are absent. While various methods to promote training and awareness programs (Anderson et al., 2019; Barnhill, 2016; Bryce et al., 2021; Clouder et al., 2020; Roth et al., 2018), isolated support programs and instructional strategies are presented, they are limited. Furthermore, most studies cited autism under the umbrella of neurodiverse learning differences, deficits, and disability (Barnhill, 2018; Elias et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2018, Kim & Crowley, 2021). The literature does not demonstrate an all-encompassing program that unites perspective with actions simultaneously addressing the key elements that promote graduation for the ASD community specifically, until now.

Theoretical Framework

The nature of this study's phenomena lies in the ability of the case to manage the empirical challenges that impede degree completion for autistic college students. The following

theoretical constructs help develop meaning, understanding, and assumptions about the key elements that stifle the completion of higher education for autistic students. This section identifies two theories that guide the following study. Social stigma theory seeks to understand human nature's reaction to differences that create perceptions about individuals (Goffman, 1963). Perceptions may be positive or negative depending on their relation to the social norm (Goffman, 1963). Negative perceptions can lead to the marginalization and disenfranchisement of some populations, leading to the impediment of academic achievement (DeBrabander et al., 2019; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020). Neurodiversity theory establishes that differences are not necessarily deficits and that these differences have value and can socially, culturally, and academically contribute (Blume, 1998; Singer, 1999). Neurodiversity provides insight into how perception impacts behaviors and is a progressive pathway toward inclusion and access, in this case, in higher education (Cage et al., 2020; Nah & Tan, 2021; Tubele et al., 2017). Increased access and inclusion increase academic achievement in higher education (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Corrigan et al., 2005; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Nevill & White, 2011).

Social Stigma Theory

Social stigma theory identifies how human perception of another creates and defines social identity, and identity fosters value, respect, stigma, and bias (Goffman, 1963). Social identity is constructed by the interpretation and synthesis of characteristics, behaviors, attributes, and deficits and are the elements that determine social identification as a “normal” or “other” (Goffman, 1963, p.1; Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019). Social identity is determined by measuring features against a standardized expectation of behavior (Goffman, 1963). Expectations are measured against past experiences, social encounters, cultural behavior expectations, situational awareness, and social demands (Goffman, 1963). Markers are tallied and used to evaluate social attributes and social deficits (Goffman, 1963). Social disruptions or

deficits are measured again against a threshold determined by experiences, expectations, and background to designate a range of acceptability (Goffman, 1963). The margin between acceptability and unacceptable features defines a “normal” or “other” identity (Goffman, 1963, p.3).

The acquisition of “other” categorization does not immediately indicate social rejection or isolation; this acquisition has its own degree of social acceptance (Goffman, 1963, p. 11; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019). The “other” may not be totally discounted when physical or intellectual handicaps are obvious (Goffman, 1963, p.11; Mulholland & Cumming, 2016; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Social acceptance and even positive attitudes can be attributed to individuals with disabilities when they are visibly seen, while hidden or invisible disabilities tend to create negative perceptions and attitudes, categorizing deviant behavior and the group as destructive and dangerous (Barnhill, 2016; Cage et al., 2020; Cernius, 2017; Crompton et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019; Mulholland & Cumming, 2016; Zeedyk et al., 2019). The “other” is viewed as “tainted,” “discounted,” or of less value (Goffman, 1963, p. 11; Albrecht et al., 1982; Corrigan et al., 2005). Negative social classification is the basis for negative perception, stigmatization, prejudice, and negative bias, mainly when “discrediting effect[s]” are extreme, the “other” is considered a social “failure,” or handicapped (Goffman, 1963, p. 11). Negative perceptions facilitate negative attitudes and matriculate negative behavioral reactions (Crompton et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019; Mulholland & Cumming, 2016). Categorical perceptions made by the interpreter are often translated to an entire “grouping of others” (Goffman, 1963). Stigmatization is the process of identifying and linking stereotypes with negative behavioral, physical, and social features that lead to separatism (Brosnan & Mills, 2016). The stigmatization of autistic people finds its roots in such groupings (Albrecht et al.,

1982; Goffman, 1963; Mulholland & Cumming, 2016; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Social stigma theory is reflected in the conditions that facilitate low graduation rates for ASD college student populations. It is substantiated in the literature where both isolated ASD populations and neurodiverse populations in higher education that include ASD experience neglect, marginalization, and isolation (Barnhill, 2016; Cage et al., 2020; Cernius, 2017; Crompton et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019; Mulholland & Cumming, 2016; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Therefore, social stigmas that create existing negative perceptions about the ASD population in higher education aid in the matriculation of increased dropout or degree incompleteness (Bakker et al., 2019; Cage & Howes, 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; Viezel et al., 2020).

Theory of Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity was first introduced in Blume's (1998) socio-political review of the journal the *Study of Neurological Typical*, which studies and presents autism research (Strand, 2017). Blume's (1998) review sparked the autism self-advocacy movement. The movement later matriculated into academic realms with the help of Judy Singer, a critical researcher of sociology with Asperger's (1999; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). Singer (1999) developed the neurodiversity movement and guided it toward the educational theory that promotes inclusion, differentiation, and understanding (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Nah & Tan, 2021; Strand, 2017). Neurodiversity offers an alternative lens through which perceptions may be categorized and managed socially. Rather than maintaining social constructs of the "normals" by socially isolating the "others," neurodiversity says there is no normal and other; all are variants of humanness (Baker, 2011; Goffman, 1963. p. 1; Kapp et al., 2013; Singer, 1999; Zeedyk et al., 2019).

Neurodiversity provides social bridge-building opportunities between the deviant and the standard and facilitates more understanding of alternative learning conditions, realities, sensory

experiences, communication, and knowledge (Baker, 2011; Blume, 1998; Goffman, 1963, p. 10; Kapp et al., 2013; Singer, 1999; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Neurodiversity represents neurodivergent identity by defining who someone is, not just how someone is (Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Kapp et al., 2013; Singer, 1999; Strand, 2017). Here is where the individual with ASD prefers to be identified as an autistic person rather than an individual with autism (von Below et al., 2021). Autism is not a condition that is separate from the individual but is instead part of their identity, meaning without autism, the autistic person would be someone else (Blume, 1998; Clouder et al., 2020; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Kapp et al., 2013; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Singer, 1999; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020; von Below et al., 2021). Autism cannot be removed from the individual like a disease such as cancer, where the individual is first, and the cancer is secondary, independent of their identity. Autism and identity are interlinked; personality traits of autistic people are as unique from one autistic individual to another as no two fingerprints of any neurotype are alike. Therefore, neurodiversity says that conditions like autism do not require a cure nor a source of origin and should not be socially hidden or masked as they are defining features of the individual's identity (Blume, 1998; Cage et al., 2020; Clouder et al., 2020; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Kapp et al., 2013; Singer, 1999; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020).

Neurodiversity requires more education and awareness of different neuro types, value, acceptance, and celebration from neurotypical communities so that value grows and their voices are heard (Blume, 1998; Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Kapp et al., 2013; Singer, 1999; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). These elements directly impact degree completion for autistic college students (Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Kapp et al., 2013; Singer, 1999; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020).

Related Literature

Perceptions that are formed about autism are heavily influenced by social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) and neurodiversity Blume (1998). The historic context addresses how neurodiversity evolved from a social movement to a guiding education theory that promotes inclusion and defines neurodiversity as a learning and developmental difference, that is, a naturally occurring human variation, rather than a disability or deficit that needs to be cured or fixed (Cox et al., 2020). Social contexts reflect how the rise in autism diagnosis has paved the way for children to receive earlier and more accessibility interventions, increasing their opportunities to enroll in post-secondary educational programs (Bakker et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2018; Maenner et al., 2020).

Autism

Autism is characterized by two main domains in which social communication and interaction comprise one diagnostic criterion (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines autism as “a neurodevelopmental diagnosis characterized by social communication deficits, sensory sensitivities,’ [and] ‘restricted” behavior and interests, repetitive or stereotyped patterns of activities and interests (von Below et al., 2021, p. 1; see also American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Restrictive, rigid, and repetitive interests, patterns of behavior, and activities tend to limit or cloud social interactions between autistic individual and their peers or neurotypical counterparts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Nah & Tan, 2021; Saade et al., 2020). Behavioral expectations between neurotypical and autistic individuals may create social conflicts that impede understanding and communication (Kim & Crowley, 2021). When these conflicts occur, the frustration experienced by the autistic individual may end in verbal or physical outbursts and inflict harm on oneself or another (Kapp et al., 2013; Sasson et al., 2017; D. White et al., 2019). This may also occur as a reaction to environmental stimuli or a breach in rigidity, routine,

sensory overload, or personal space (Kapp et al., 2013; Sasson et al., 2017; D. White et al., 2019). These reactions are unique to the individual and unpredictable; they furthermore straddle the line between perceived deviance and impairment (Albrecht et al., 1982; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Kapp et al., 2013). An autistic person can experience physical and emotional pain and harm from environmental violations as a byproduct of autism as a medical condition (Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Kapp et al., 2013). However, if behavioral reactions inflict physical harm on another, social expectations define the violator as dangerous while levying isolation, categorical perceptions, and social stigmas as a punishment (Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Goffman, 1963). The level of isolation or social distance is determined by the degree of violation between disability and deviance (Albrecht et al., 1982; Silva et al., 2020; Williams, 2001).

While social deviants carry heavier penalties than those of the disabled, social penalties are still exacted on the disabled, particularly when the neurotypical perceive the disability as too unpredictable or disruptive (Albrecht et al., 1982; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Silva et al., 2020; Williams, 2001). Chronic offensive behavior is viewed as disruptive and socially destabilizing, which thrives on social fear and deepens stigmatization spreading the perception across all categories under the deviant label (Albrecht et al., 1982; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016). The nature of autism's vast variation, the broad variety of markers, traits, ever-evolving understanding, and unpredictable reactions to sensory stimuli make autistic individuals a prime target for social isolation (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Marsack & Perry, 2018; Silva et al., 2020; 2019; Veelen et al., 2020). Furthermore, while the label demonstrates commonalities in behavior, development, and communication deficits, they do not tell the whole story. Each case of autism varies by degree and symptoms and is nuanced to the individual's personality, background, culture, and life experiences (Nah & Tan, 2021).

Stigmatization

Awkward and uncomfortable experiences for neurotypical individuals that cause social disruptions influence attitudes and cause a shift towards distancing, shunning, or isolating the individual or group who pushed the social disruption (Clouder et al., 2020). “Social distancing” (Albrecht et al., 1982, p. 1319), “social exclusion” (Marsack & Perry, 2018, p. 535; Brosnan & Mills, 2016), and isolation are byproducts of negative social perceptions or stigma (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019). Social stigmas influence social interactions by informing an innate cultural impulse to social distance, segregate, and isolate from the stigmatized individual or group (Albrecht et al., 1982; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Corrigan et al., 2005; Galligan et al., 2013; Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019; Veelen et al., 2020). Stigmas are often subcategorized into two groupings: deviance and disability (Albrecht et al., 1982). Disability is defined as a chronic or incurable physical, developmental, emotional, or intellectual impairment that reduces functionality and prevents one from keeping up with the “normals” (Albrecht et al., 1982; Goffman, 1963). While the deviant enacts undesirable behavior that directly conflicts with the normalized social standards and values, these manifest negative connotations, fear, and stereotypes that breed social stigmatization (Albrecht et al., 1982; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019).

Stigmatization of Autism

Autism is a unique social paradigm representing the cross-section between the stigmatized and the pitied (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019). Autism is both a stigmatized category of social deviants and an advocated community of the disabled where cognitive and intellectual disabilities exist on the spectrum, problematic social behavior produced by sensory deficits or overload and communication deficits manifest stigmatization through self-stigma, public stigma, associated stigma, and structural stigmas

(Albrecht et al., 1982; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019; D. White et al., 2019). Due to the nature of ASD being an inward condition, meaning the effects of sensory, communication, rigid behavior, and learning differences are not physically visible to the naked or untrained eye, autism is often called the invisible disorder (Barnhill, 2016; Cage et al., 2020; Cernius, 2017; Crompton et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019; Mulholland & Cumming, 2016; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Self-stigma is the internal impact of psychological degradation of one's self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-relevance where the individual internalizes the stigma as part of their identity (Corrigan et al., 2005, Link, 1987; Markowitz, 1998; Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019). Public stigma is both the "social and psychological reaction" to the stigmatized individual (Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019, p. 96- 97), where the public or social group endorses social stigmas and stereotypes through continued perception and social actions like exclusion and isolation (Corrigan et al., 2005; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; D. White et al., 2019).

Neurodiversity Reduces Stigmatization

Neurodiversity challenges social dynamics and expectations (Singer, 1999). Expectations and social dynamics are those that have been established by the neurotypical majority (Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008; Singer, 1999). As neurodiverse diagnosis has increased due to increased access to earlier intervention, so has support and awareness (Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019). Additionally, more accurate diagnosis, alternative, and higher quality interventions and therapies help support neurodiverse communities by investing in the human rights, value, and dignity of those with neurodiverse learning differences (Cox et al., 2020; 2021; Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019; Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008). The neurodiverse community no longer accepts silence and is no longer willing to let its advocates speak solely for their needs (Clouder

et al., 2020). In the effort to tackle stigmatization and reduce its influence over social and academic perceptions and relationships, the neurodiverse hope to increase awareness, knowledge, acceptance, and support programs to foster new social expectations (Clouder et al., 2020; Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019; Stockwell et al., 2020; S. W. White et al., 2011). Higher education offers an avenue to reduce stigmas towards the neurodiverse (Clouder et al., 2020; Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019; Stockwell et al., 2020; S. W. White et al., 2011).

Autism in Higher Education

There has been a notable increase in students with autism and other spectrum disorders like Asperger's Syndrome (AS) now entering college and postsecondary education (Bakker et al., 2019; Barnhill, 2016; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Elias et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; 2021; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Kim, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020; Shackelford, 2010; Viesel et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). Some research shows that 1 in 59 children in the US currently will have ASD (Baio et al., 2018; Center for Disease Control, 2019), while others estimate that 1 in 54 students meet the criteria to receive a diagnosis (Maenner et al., 2020). These figures directly impact future college enrollment. As of 2017, it was estimated that 433,000 autistic students would be enrolled in college by 2020 (Cox, 2017). Currently, 17.4% indicated from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) that autistic individuals had attended a 4-year post-secondary institution (Newman et al., 2011). In 2017 and 2018, the United Kingdom reported 11,015 autistic individuals studying at the university level (Cage & Howes, 2020; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019). In the US, studies have suggested that 45% or roughly 550,000 autistic children transitioning to adulthood over the next decade will enroll in a university, post-secondary institution, college, technical, or vocational school (Jackson et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2011; Vincent, 2019).

Bakker et al. (2019), Dymond et al. (2017), Gillespie-Lynch et al. (2015; 2019; 2021), Gobbo and Schmulsky (2014), Sturm and Kasari (2019), and Vadnjal and Radoja (2020) suggest that autistic college students offer strengths in academia that may outweigh those of their neurotypical or non-autistic peer groups. Autistic students often face struggles transitioning to college life impact, coping with a new living and learning environment, and social isolation means universities must recognize the value in supporting these budding populations and an alcove of untapped academic potential (Bakker et al., 2019; Conner, 2013; Gelbar et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2013; McMorris et al., 2019; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020). Connectedness and social integration into college life increase social and academic demands (Barnhill, 2016; Brosnan & Mills, 2016). Challenges presented by the two key diagnostic domains noted about social communication and restrictiveness mean autistic individuals struggle in this highly social learning environment (Chung et al., 2015; Nah & Tan, 2021; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020). Additionally, autistic individuals often struggle with changing routines and unfamiliar social, living, and learning environments leaving them at a distinct disadvantage (Barnhill, 2016; Sasson et al., 2017; Shackelford, 2010; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; D. White et al., 2019).

As autistic student populations have grown, a general absence of knowledge and understanding about autism from peers, faculty, and staff is apparent in the literature (Barnhill, 2016; Cage & Howes, 2020; Sasson et al., 2017; Viesel et al., 2020). Low autism awareness, knowledge from faculty and staff, difficulties receiving a diagnosis, lack of understanding, and low mental health fitness are key challenges faced by autistic college students (Cage & Howes, 2020). Decreasing stigmatization, boosting positive attitudes, improving the social perception of autism through awareness, increased social and academic integration and acceptance will cause social isolation and dropout rates to diminish while raising the feeling of support and the quality

of education, well-being, and long-term quality of life of autistic individuals in college (Barnhill, 2016; Cage & Howes, 2020; Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019; Mulholland & Cumming, 2016; Roth et al., 2018; Sasson et al., 2017; Viesel et al., 2020). However, the literature demonstrates that meaningful awareness and knowledge training can decrease stigmatization towards autistic college students (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Roth et al., 2018; Sasson et al., 2017; Viesel et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). Elevating peer relationships is the first bridge in enriching social and academic achievement while deepening social connections for the benefit of both the neurodiverse and the neurotypical (Barnhill, 2016; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020; Sasson et al., 2017; Stockwell et al., 2020; Viesel et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019).

Peer Perceptions

The autism community has been identified as a stigmatized group (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Sasson et al., 2020; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Negative perceptions and the resulting stigmatization of ASD disorders affect the student's personal, emotional, and academic well-being (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Corrigan et al., 2005; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Nevill & White, 2011). Therefore, it is critical to examine the perceptions and stigmas of college peers, as they notably impact academic success and graduation (Nevill & White, 2011). Non-autistic groups have reported a reduced likelihood of socializing with autistic people in lieu of these existing biases, perceptions, and prejudices (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Sasson et al., 2017; D. White et al., 2019). Many of these stigmas evolved from behavioral misconceptions, social expectations, and unfamiliarity with their peers' conditions (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Goffman, 1963; Saade et al., 2020; Sasson et al., 2017; Shackelford, 2010; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). Interestingly, female peers were found to be more open to social

engagement with autistic individuals than male peers (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Stockwell et al., 2020). This could serve as a potential initial outlet to implement awareness and knowledge training among college students (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Corrigan et al., 2005; DeBrabander et al., 2019; Roth et al., 2018).

Morrison et al. (2019) and Sasson et al. (2017) further reported that neurotypical individuals typically held reduced interests and intentions to interact or hold casual conversations with autistic individuals. Social expectations and autism nuances often generate awkward and “non-normative” interactions (Stockwell et al., 2020, p. 1). These behaviors may include the violation of personal space, abnormal facial expressions, repetitive bodily gestures, atypical gazes, uncommon vocal patterns, a lack of eye contact, fixations on an unshared interest, or a lack of common “special interests” (Stockwell et al., 2020, p. 1; Sasson et al., 2017), these tend to drive the uninformed neurotypical away, reinforcing social stigmas and barriers (Albrecht et al., 1982; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Saade et al., 2020; Sasson et al., 2017; Silva et al., 2020; 2019; D. White et al., 2019). Lastly, research suggests that when the presence of a formal label or diagnosis is established, neurotypical peers tend to demonstrate more positive attitudes toward lesser or more mild cases of ASD, such as AS (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Butler & Gills, 2011). Therefore, it is unsurprising that researchers have also indicated that college students tend to mask or withhold their diagnosis, abdicating support in fear of peer rejection (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Galligan et al., 2013; Vadjnal & Radoja, 2020).

Staff Perceptions

Growing numbers of autistic students enrolling and attending universities means that staff and faculty will inevitably be called on to support and guide the needs of these students (Bakker et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021). The current literature shows that college staff members, such as those that work in disability support services, were found to hold persistent

misconceptions about autism and neurodiverse communities (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; 2021; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Saade et al., 2020; Roth et al., 2019). These staff members were found mainly to hold initial biases about working with and for this community, which inevitably impacts professional performance (Holmqvist et al., 2019; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Roth et al., 2018). Kim and Crowley (2021) indicate in their study that autistic college students experience a lack of helpfulness and inaccessibility and observe a low conceptualization of autism in DSO staff members.

The autism knowledge gap for college staff members perpetuates stigmas, disenfranchised self-identification, and advocacy while distancing the student from accessing current support programs, resources, and accommodations (Kim & Crowley, 2021; Roth et al., 2018). Kim and Crowley's (2021) and DeBrabander et al. (2019) studies note that autistic students found the lack of awareness and support a deterrent from registering for classes; in some cases, the student attempted to manage the process themselves only to experience academic difficulties that jeopardized their attrition. However, disability awareness training has improved conditions on campus for the neurodiverse student and improved knowledge and awareness for the administrative and support staff, who showed an increase in understanding of the academic and social support needs of neurodiverse students (DeBrabander et al., 2019; Murray et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2011 Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020). Training additionally demonstrated an increase in positive attitudes in working with neurodiverse students while reducing previously held stigmas (Murray et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2011; Padden & Ellis, 2015; Roth, 2018).

Generalized disability training for university academic and coordination departments, like Human Resources, Library, Admissions, Financial Aid, and other non-disability or affiliated support departments, have thus far not been uncovered in an extensive literature search (Anderson et al., 2019; Barnhill, 2016; Bryce et al., 2021; Cox et al., 2021; Gobbo & Shmulsky,

2014; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Nah & Tan, 2021; Saade et al., 2020; Shackelford, 2010; Tipton & Blacher, 2014; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020; Viezel et al., 2020; Zeedyk et al., 2019). However, Kim's (2021) most current study tested the impact of knowledge and awareness training of DSO staff. Kim's (2021) work first shows a critical academic move and interest toward the enhanced benefits of neurodiversity in the college community. Additionally, the role of higher education staffing is recognized for its significance in enriching the educational and social experience of the rising neurodiverse population entering college. Lastly, Kim's (2021) findings, like that of Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014), substantiate that an increase in positive attitudes towards collaborative work and reduced stigma towards neurodiverse students can be obtained through quality awareness and knowledge training and further serve as a template for future critical research.

Educator Perceptions

Negative perceptions and stigmas were commonly found among primary education both in and outside of the US; these include college educators, as well as pre-service educators throughout the literature (Barnhill, 2016; Elias et al., 2019; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Marsack, & Perry, 2018; Nah & Tan, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020; Viezel et al., 2020). Using a Likert-scale survey, that while educators have indicated they strongly agree that they “would not mind” a child displaying behaviors associated with autism “being in my classroom,” the teacher was more likely to perceive the student's behavior in a negative light (Nah & Tan, 2021). Similarly, Kim and Crowley's (2021) study interviewed 27 autistic college students about their experiences with DSOs and their professors; results indicated negative experiences with DSOs but more pointedly discussed how many professors refused to adhere to accommodations and were often inaccessible when the student needed assistance.

Post-secondary faculty members perceive students with autism to struggle with executive functioning skills, problematic behavior, academic competence, “autonomy and independence,” and “the development and sustainment of interpersonal relationships” (Barnhill, 2016; Elias et al., 2019, p. 263; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Saade et al., 2020; Vадnjal & Radoja, 2020; Viesel et al., 2020). The lack of awareness about the challenges faced by students with autism creates a barrier to access (Barnhill, 2016; DeBrabander et al., 2019; Elias et al., 2019; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). College educators do not know how to help their neurodiverse, here autistic students, which is largely linked to negative stigmas, then from simple biases held by misinformation (Barnhill, 2016; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Padden & Ellis, 2015). To overcome stigmas held by college educators towards the autistic and neurodiverse community, increased understanding is critical (Barnhill, 2016; Elias et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; D. White et al., 2019; S. W. White et al., 2011; Viesel et al., 2020). Informed training will help faculty to better understand the characteristics unique to the autism population and will further help guide their instructional techniques (Barnhill, 2016; Elias et al., 2019; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Murrey et al., 2008; Shackelford, 2010; Vадnjal & Radoja, 2020; Viesel et al., 2020).

Historically, higher education faculty have significantly influenced their student’s mental, academic, and emotional well-being (Holmqvist et al., 2019; Stokowski et al., 2020). Educators are in a unique yet critical position, where they have the most direct contact and interface with their students, making them the best candidates to access and retain support accommodation services for the students who need it (Elias et al., 2019). Autistic individuals have been found to perceive current treatment from their educators as generally negative and biased, further isolating them from seeking assistance and the help they deserve (Elias et al., 2019; Sasson et al., 2020). Furthermore, the lack of general training for educators to support students with disabilities leaves

the educators feeling unprepared, incompetent in the detection and understanding of specific disorders, and uninformed of the full scope of responsibility they hold towards the neurodiverse community (Elias et al., 2019; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020).

Neurotypical students struggle to seek guidance or question a professor's pedagogical techniques for fear of punishment (Stokowski et al., 2020). How can college educators expect autistic students to confront these same challenges with fewer coping and social tools? Ironically, like the evolving stigmas surrounding neurodiversity, higher education faculty are moving towards more neurodiverse attitudes that recognize the student as a valued individual with autonomous ideas, thoughts, and personal authority, all of which should be celebrated (Stokowski et al., 2020). The cultivation of individuality and autonomy is where neurodiverse attitudes meet the focused recognition of the human variant in neurodiversity (Clouder et al., 2020; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Stokowski et al., 2020).

To pave the way for more autism social inclusion and academic achievement, current research needs to expand neurodiverse ideals where engagement and awareness unpack how persistent perceptions and stigmas held by college educators towards autistic students affect their ability to engage and achieve on multiple fronts (Zeedyk et al., 2019). Researchers like Zeedyk et al. (2019) discuss how little about faculty perception in post-secondary institutions is known. They further indicate the significance of examining STRs as a key feature in gleaning an accurate conceptualization of what faculty or post-secondary education understand and perceive about their students with ASD (Wenzel & Rowley, 2010; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Blacher et al. (2014), Eisenhower et al. (2015), and Zeedyk et al. (2019) purport that STRs from K 12 show lower-quality relationships and closeness between educators and students with developmental disabilities than those with neurotypical students.

Autism Awareness and Knowledge Training

The literature indicates that knowledge and training for higher education faculty and staff are vital in ensuring that students with disabilities, like autism, are given equivalent opportunities to succeed at the college level as their peers (Holmqvist et al., 2019; Moola, 2015). Holmqvist et al. (2019), Murrey et al. (2008), and Viezel et al. (2020) found that non-inclusive learning environments may be in part the result of impoverished faculty and staff readiness and preparedness to handle the challenges students with ASD experience at the individual and organization level. Overall, the research indicates a willingness of university faculty and staff to learn more about ASD and neurodiverse disabilities, the accommodations needed to assuage academic and social success as well as the understanding of the features and challenges that act as barriers to graduation (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Moola, 2015; Murray et al., 2008; Smith & Bell, 2015). Inclusive learning settings that are rich in communication techniques, e-learning environments, and face-to-face learning and support were shown to improve the students' sense of support and value while building up faculty and staff's sense of competence and readiness to teach and support their students with both ASD and special educational needs (Chatzara et al., 2016; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Kim, 2021, Kim & Crowley, 2021).

Increased accessibility to the internet matriculates greater ease in accessing information, media, academics, and social connections. Using modern tools to provide access more efficiently to knowledge and awareness training for autism is an easy leap (Roth et al., 2018; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). This was seen in Tipton and Blacher's (2014) adaptation of the Autism Survey from Stone's (1987) instrument. Tipton and Blacher's (2014) survey represented a cost-conscious, reliable, and effective way to deliver autism knowledge training for today's institutions. Bodies of research from Chebli (2016), Holmqvist et al. (2019), Leblanc et al. (2009), Roth et al. (2018), Saade et al. (2021), and Silva et al. (2019; 2020) all tested the

measurable difference between initial knowledge and the effects of knowledge and awareness training had on inclusion, pedagogy, social isolation, and interaction of both educators and neurotypical student peers, towards those with autism. The findings substantiated that knowledge and awareness training increased autism knowledge, inclusion, pedagogical techniques, and willingness toward social inclusion but did not substantiate an apparent decrease in negative attitudes (Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2021; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015).

Similarly, Gillespie- Lynch et al. (2015) found that online training for peer students increased autism knowledge and understanding but could not definitively suggest a decrease in stigmatization or an increased willingness for neurotypical students to engage in romantic relationships with autistic peers. Despite mixed conclusions, Silva et al.'s (2020;2019) study provides hope; they observed an increase in pro-social behavior, or that which intentionally looks to include the stigmatized individual, as a natural empathetic response to ostracism. These findings are significant in that they suggest stigmatization can be overcome by increasing genuine empathy by raising the value of diverse social identities (Goffman, 1963; Silva et al., 2020; 2019). Meaningful understanding and acceptance of autism can be gleaned from awareness and knowledge training (Barnhill, 2016; Saade et al., 2020; Shackelford, 2010; Silva et al., 2020; 2019; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020; Viezel et al., 2020). Furthermore, shared social reciprocity means that the neurodiverse are expected to self-advocate, seek therapies, and adapt intrinsic social behaviors towards neurotypical social expectations (Blume, 1998; Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2020;2019). Neurotypicals must then cultivate current, accurate, and expanded knowledge of the neurodiverse to balance social normality with innate humanness (Blume, 1998; Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2019; 2020).

Successful Support Programs

The literature accounts for successful neurodiversity support programs in higher education. The US Department of Education began funding nearly 27 post-secondary educational institutions across the country since 2010 to establish Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) (Nevill & White, 2011). These types of programs offer opportunities for learners with ASD and cognitive disabilities to attend college, live in the college environment, access academia, socialize, receive job training, and help set up independent living opportunities and environments (Glickman, 2010; Nevill & White, 2011). Separate institutional programs offer a baseline for more institutions to grow their perception of autism and the value in neurodiverse learning (Shackelford, 2010; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). For institutions to set an expectation of neurodiverse inclusion and acceptance, it must be established from the top-down (Kim, 2021; Nah & Tan, 2021; Saade et al., 2021; Shackelford, 2010; Viezel et al., 2020). Recommendations across the spectrum of research literature were attained from first-hand experiences, current and past autistic college students, autism experts, and counselors (Barnhill et al., 2016; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). The literature identifies the need to educate “all college campus departments on” autism and other neurodiverse conditions like Asperger's (AS) and high-functioning autism (HFA) as part of securing higher student graduation rates (Barnhill et al., 2016, p. 8; Browning & Miron, 2007; Fatscher & Naughton, 2012; Shackelford, 2010; Viezel et al., 2020).

Among programming styles, individualized education planning, mental and emotional health resources, and support were found to be the most reliable for retaining students, building confidence, and encouraging social connection (Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Scheef, 2019; Viezel, 2020). Holmqvist et al. (2019) and Hu and Chandrasekhar's (2021) studies identified a cross-section of the most current and commonly provided pre-service educational training, campus accommodations, and college support programs advocating neurodiversity. Thirteen

types of accommodation and support were identified by Hu and Chandrasekhar (2021). Of these markers were advisory, extra time in testing, alternative test sites, tutoring, assigned note-taker, technology supports like Dragon NaturallySpeaking, Smart Pens, employment preparation, decreased course load, copies of notes, life skills support like budgeting, laundry, sexuality, hygiene, social skills instruction, peer mentors, and registration priority (Barnhill, 2016; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Shackelford, 2010; Viesel et al., 2020).

One consistent factor is the need for administrative passion and support for students within the autism community (Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; Viesel et al., 2020). Without the initiative and support of university leadership, these programs could not secure funding and resources to support these training and support programs. Furthermore, university leaders are the captains of the campus learning environment; they set a precedent for academic and social expectations (Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021). Academic leadership can champion neurodiverse inclusion through reliable support programs and by developing a deep appreciation for ASD value and respect (Barnhill, 2016; Clouder et al., 2020; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; Viesel et al., 2020).

Support Strategies

The research shows that thoughtfully and discernably constructed pedagogy, professional development, training, and support for college educators and DSO staff increase awareness, decrease stigmas, and improve autistic students' academic outcomes and feelings of support (Kim et al., 2021; Kim & Crowley et al., 2021; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2021; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020). The perspectives gleaned from autistic academics on inclusive instructional practices in the field of geoscience education offer informed first-person insights from both the standpoint of an academic and from the needs of an autistic student (Kingsbury et

al., 2020; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). Kingsbury et al. (2020) suggest that faculty and university personnel work to develop effective communication with autistic students by first acknowledging communicative barriers. Communication barriers may include body language, misunderstanding of sarcasm, idioms, figurative language, or nomenclature (DeBrabander et al., 2019; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). A good rule of thumb is to participate in communication with an autistic person with the same cognizant language awareness and respect as with an international colleague (Kingsbury et al., 2020; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). Employing clarification of misunderstandings, reiterating key points, and allowing space for grace builds the bridge between the two neurotypes and foster mutual respect, value, and understanding (Kingsbury et al., 2020; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020).

Another key suggestion noted throughout the literature is the assumption of competence, where university staff and faculty acknowledge and respect ASD intelligence and expertise (Barnhill, 2016; Crompton et al., 2020; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). Central support strategies note communication dynamics between autistic and non-autism adults as the main source of academic and social challenges for autistic students (Crompton et al., 2020; DeBrabander et al., 2019; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). Miscommunication can facilitate confusion between basic instruction and expressive and it may be a key feature in the development of unfavorable perceptions and attitudes that fuel separatism between autistic and neurotypical adults (Roche et al., 2021). Managing these social expectations, perceptions, and biases is an effective support strategy where common misconceptions like the autistic person's dependence on sameness and their inability to manage change are abdicated for the expectation of individuality (Kingsbury et al., 2020; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). It is important to note that structure and routine are often beneficial for autistic people (Kingsbury et al., 2020). Over-stimulation, novel situations, and

change can crowd sensory input reducing “the amount of information processed in real-time” (Kingsbury et al., 2020, p. 306). The perpetuation of such stereotypes means that predictability and sameness are synonyms rather than seeing predictability as a framework (Kingsbury et al., 2020). Predictability frames may then be used to establish a flexible and evolving routine involving such transitions conflicts as scheduling, food, activities, behavior, and assignments while also allowing for development and growth in these areas as they wax and wane with the presences of autistic individuality life circumstances (Kingsbury et al., 2020).

Acknowledging and respecting the autistic student’s self-awareness and self- expertise is a significant element in university support strategies (Kingsbury et al. 2020; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). While university support staff, resources departments, college administrators, faculty, and parents offer an immense source of advocacy, it is critical that the student be present throughout the planning phase, particularly for any action that results in decision-making to ensure their needs are centrally addressed (Kingsbury et al., 2020; Nicolaidis et al., 2019; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020). Furthermore, Crompton et al. (2020), Kingsbury et al. (2020), and Vadjal and Radoja (2020) suggested that university educators should meet regularly with their autistic students to appraise current accommodations and modifications while building stronger communication bonds between the two mismatched neuro-types, (i.e., neurotypical and neurodiverse). These findings held true in Kim & Yoon’s (2021) study that found collaborative relationships based on current and accurate autism knowledge, acceptance, understanding, and consistent communication with autistic students resulted in improved student outcomes. Additionally, college faculty and staff must be open to graciously receiving suggestions, while maintaining an open mind to alternative support strategies. Not all autism supports and strategies work across every neuro-type, some that benefit one student could be detrimental to another, reinforcing the

importance of student-faculty relationships (Crompton et al., 2020; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Wenzel & Rowley, 2010; Vadnjaj & Radoja, 2020; Zeedyk et al., 2019).

Limited Support Strategies

To thoroughly examine the breadth of support strategies historically associated with autism, ABA must be addressed. ABA techniques are based on behavior modification with the goal of diminishing disruptive behaviors that create barriers between social inclusion and learning (Ala'i-Rosales et al., 2010; Gorycky et al., 2020; Keenan et al., 2014; Saaybi et al., 2019; Sandoval-Norton et al., 2021). Additionally, ABA techniques aim to increase language, verbal and non-verbal expressive and receptive understanding and communication, social skills, and attention span in those with ASD (Ala'i-Rosales et al., 2010; Cooper et al., 2020; Gorycky et al., 2020; Keenan et al., 2014; Saaybi et al., 2019; Sandoval-Norton et al., 2021). ABA therapy techniques try to address and overcome issues impacting individuals with ASD and their quality of life (Cooper et al., 2020; Gorycky et al., 2020; Keenan et al., 2014). The instructional strategies used in ABA intend to help reduce or ideally remove barriers to learning, socializing, and independence for autistic young adults (Cooper et al., 2020; Gorycki et al., 2020; Keenan et al., 2014; Roll-Pettersson et al., 2020).

The central tenets of ABA flow from behaviorist theories founded in Ivar Lovaas's theory of behavior modification that suggests behavior is caused by external stimuli in one's environment, making external rewards reinforcing for positive behaviors, and external punishments discouraging negative behaviors (Rekers & Lovaas, 1974; Sandoval-Norton et al., 2021). The seven key tenets of ABA are: applied, that which improves the daily life of the learner and guardian; behavior, that which is observed and measured; analytic, that which uses data to inform decisions, technological which are those procedures that are clear and concise to allow others to accurately implement, conceptually systematic that which uses interventions

founded in academic research, effective, those interventions that improve behavior in a practical way, and generality are those behavioral changes that have longevity and utility in other environments (Baer et al., 1968; Gorycki et al., 2020). ABA, as a theoretical approach, is the catalysts for which the therapist, guardian, and educators relearns and rethinks how they may better teach the autistic individual in accordance with ABA as a support strategy (Gorycki et al., 2020). The tenets act as a framework for ABA therapists, while the application of ABA techniques is solely dependent on the needs and characteristics of the autistic individual (Cooper et al., 2020; Gorycki et al., 2020; Keenan et al., 2014; Roll-Pettersson et al. 2020). ABA evolves as the autistic person develops and masters goals and confronts new challenges (Gorycki et al. 2020).

To ensure efficacy, the current study must represent a non-partisan review of ABA. Therefore, as the literature reflects a side of ABA as a highly controversial method the barriers of ABA efficacy must be presented (Sandoval- Norton & Shkedy, 2019; 2021). Some academics have found the methods and models, unethical, unfounded by science leaving irreparable damage to the autistic person's psyche, emotional, and behavioral health, and in more pervasive terms they deem ABA therapy abusive (Gorycki et al., 2020; Roll-Pettersson et al., 2020; Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy, 2019; 2021). There is research present that indicates long-term behavioral modification may be damaging to autistic young adults resulting in depression, anxiety, and self-degradation (Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy, 2019; 2021). Some find that ABA relies on therapeutic remedies that demonstrate marginal longevity, meaning the skills are only translated when the therapists or main caregiver are present resulting in prompt dependency (Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy, 2019; 2021). Furthermore, Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy (2019; 2021) indicates that most research on ABA effectiveness has been targeted at high functioning, verbal, and those participants with measurable IQ (Intelligence Quotient) above 70 (Virués- Ortega, 2010).

Sandoval-Norton and Shkedy (2019; 2021) go on to assert that the studies used as support for ABA have left the non-verbal and low functioning population of ASD unrepresented, as they are unable to participate in IQ testing. However, ABA is highly recommended by physicians and the CDC (Center for Disease Control) and further applied to these populations making the practice unethical, as it does not account for the effects of long-term exposure to behavior modification in a population that cannot speak for themselves (Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy, 2019; 2021).

Arguments raging between the two camps both in support and in opposition to ABA strategies, methods, theories, and techniques drink from the same well of concern. Both parties want to understand, support, and ensure a better quality of life and future for autistic children as they become adults (Ala'i-Rosales et al., 2010; Cooper et al., 2020; Gorycki et al., 2020; Keenan et al., 2014; Roll- Pettersson et al., 2020; Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy, 2019; 2021).

Absence of ABA Presence in Higher Education

Research indicates that ABA interventions have shown to be most effective when administered early and continuously throughout a child's development into their young adult years (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, n.d.; Cernius, 2017; Gorycki et al., 2020; Mayville & Letso, 2010). Furthermore, some academics go as far as to deem ABA as the gold standard for which to treat ASD (Eldevik et al., 2009; Gorycki et al., 2020; Vismara & Rogers, 2010). Effects of continuous ABA support show long-term positive outcomes for autistic young adults, such as employment, independent living, higher education, and undetectable ASD symptoms (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, n.d.; Cernius, 2017; Gorycki et al., 2020; Mayville & Letso, 2010; New York State Department of Health Early Intervention Program, 1999; Virués- Ortega, 2010). ABA has been grounded in many longitudinal studies that explore the efficacy of ABA as a regulated support service that teaches methods, theories, and intervention techniques to the ASD community (Ala'i-Rosales et al., 2010; Autistic Self Advocacy Network, n.d.; Bejnö, 2021;

Cernius, 2017; Keenan et al., 2014; Mayville & Letso, 2010; Saaybi et al., 2019; Sandoval-Norton et al., 2021).

The current study targeted relationships associated with a population of autistic individuals in their late teens into their early 20s. ABA has respectively demonstrated effective support and intervention strategies to help this targeted age transition into full adulthood (Ala'i-Rosales et al., 2010; Gorycki et al., 2020; Mayville & Letso., 2010; Vismara & Roger, 2010). ABA strategies for young adults focus on providing critical skills to help them live independently (Ala'i-Rosales et al., 2010; Gorycki et al., 2020; Mayville & Letso., 2010; Vismara & Roger, 2010). During this stage of development, autistic young adults, as well as neurotypical young adults, are often transitioning into higher education and are faced with many common challenges of newly gained independence and the loss of parental and academic structures (Barnhill, 2014; Cage et al., 2020; Clouder et al., 2020; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Gorycki et al., 2020; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Nuske et al., 2019; Robertson & Ne'eman, 2008; Vadnjaj & Radoja, 2020; von Below et al., 2021). Years of behavior modification, communication, social skills, and attention training acquired in ABA offer pertinent resolutions and support possibilities to allow this population to flourish in a higher education setting (Gerhardt & Wiess, (n.d.); Gorycki et al., 2020; Mayville & Letso, 2010; Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy, 2019). Historically, ABA used procedural applications that teach skills not only to the client but to the guardian, educators, and significant others to help reduce challenging social and internal behaviors, increase coping and social skills, and improve the quality of life for autistic people (Ala'i-Rosales et al., 2010; Cernius, 2017; Gorycki et al., 2020; Meyers & Johnson, 2007; National Standards Project, 2009; Roll-Pettersson et al., 2020; Sandoval-Norton & Shkedy, 2019). These strategies contribute to educational improvement and prosperity, which is why they are backed even by the CDC (2019) and the United States Surgeon General (1999) as effective

support therapy for autistic individuals throughout their life span (Gorycki et al., 2020). There is a critical element of theoretical and methodological rich research and analysis that goes beyond early and developmental interventions that make ABA teaching models effective for young adults in the higher education setting (Roll-Pettersson et al., 2020; Sandoval-Norton et al., 2021).

Considering 46% of the autistic population demonstrates average to above-average intelligence (CDC, 2014), proficiency memory skills, intense focus on detail and precision, creativity, passionate interests, are highly driven to acquire accurate and a full breadth of knowledge and understanding of a topic, autistic individuals more than supersede desirable traits and skills to succeed in the higher education setting (Bakker et al., 2019; Bhaumik et al., 2010; Clouder et al., 2020; Drake, 2014; Gobbo and Shmulsky, 2014; Jansen et al., 2018; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Robertson, 2008; Van Hees et al., 2015; von Below et al., 2021). The intellectual abilities coupled with ABA's ability to benefit long-term outcomes for adult autistic individuals (Cooper et al., 2020; Gorycki et al., 2020) along with the responsibility of higher education to support and enfranchise its student population, means there is a cross-section of ABA and higher education that has not been accounted for (Elias et al., 2019; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Stokowski et al., 2020). Higher education has a particular responsibility to those with special needs according to section 504 of IDEA (2004) and ADA (1990), to ensure that the ethical and moral responsibilities of these institutions are effectively carrying out their legislative responsibility (Bakker et al., 2019; Cage et al., 2020; Clouder et al., 2020; Elias & White, 2018; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Nuske et al., 2019; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020). Therefore, with such a breadth of research about ABA and its potential to enfranchise the development of autistic people (Baer et al., 1968; CDC, 2019; Christian & Poling, 1997; Cooper et al., 2020; Garcia- Albea et al., 2014; Gorycki et al., 2020; Krantz & McClannahan, 1993; 1998; MacDuff et al., 2007; Reagon & Higbee, 2009; Stauch et al., 2018; United States Surgeon General; 1999), it seems rather intuitive

that higher education, ABA, and neurodiverse communities would at least explore this research avenue, yet an exhaustive search has revealed no indication of such inquiry? If ABA has exciting potential to support the transition for young autistic adults in college, why has higher education not looked to the key tenets to help support the ever-growing ASD college population?

Perception of Support from Autistic College Students

Limited support resources for autistic students in higher education impact the ability of autistic college students to access and receive granted accommodations, leading to decreased graduation rates for this student population (Cage & Howes, 2020; Chung et al., 2015; DeBerard et al., 2004; Dryer et al., 2016; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Mulholland & Cumming, 2016; Sarrett, 2018; Shareef et al., 2015; Zeedyk et al., 2019). Autistic college students have voiced that they did not continue enrollment because they felt DSOs could not support them (Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021). However, the literature indicates that many autistic college students would value and benefit from personalized support (Cage & Howes, 2020; Ford, 2012; Scheef et al., 2019; Viezel et al., 2020). Only 36.7 % of autistic college students who receive accommodations feel that they are appropriately supported (Viezel et al., 2020), while 54.1 % of those autistic students not receiving accommodations feel that assistance would be beneficial to their academic and social success in college (Baio et al., 2018; Viezel et al., 2020). Additionally, autistic college students asserted that negative perceptions and attitudes not only from support staff, but their educators have led to negative behaviors that create barriers to their academic and social success (Anderson et al. 2019; DeBerard et al., 2004; Dryer et al., 2016; Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Sarrett, 2018).

Accommodations in higher education are not required to align with those ensured by IDEA (2004), the student IEP (Individualized Education Plan), or 504 in K-12 (ADA, 1990; Elias & White, 2018; IDEA, 2004; Jansen et al., 2018; Wenzel & Brown, 2014). However,

section 504 (IDEA, 2004) and ADA (1990) do ensure that postsecondary institutions provide access to resources and accommodations for students with disabilities (Cage & Howes, 2017; Collins & Mowbray, 2008; Kim & Crowley, 2021). These accommodations often include extended deadlines on assignments, extra test-taking time, pre-printed lecture notes, or an assigned note-taker (Cage et al., 2020; Cage & Howes, 2020; Jansen et al., 2018), alternate exams, and assignment formatting (Lombardi & Lalor, 2017). The literature consistently demonstrates an unsettling, shared experience between autistic college students and the inconsistent fulfillment of their granted accommodations (Bolourian et al., 2018b; Cage et al., 2020; Child & Langford, 2011; Clouder et al., 2020; Couzens et al., 2015; Griffin & Pollak, 2009; Jackson et al., 2018; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Shaw & Anderson, 2018; Vincent et al., 2015). Many autistic students were shown to have experienced an unwillingness to uphold granted accommodations as well as personally requested accommodations by college educators (Bolourian et al., 2018b; Cage et al., 2020; Child & Langford, 2011; Clouder et al., 2020; Couzens et al., 2015; Griffin & Pollak, 2009; Jackson et al., 2018; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Shaw & Anderson, 2018; Vincent et al., 2015). Additionally, autistic students have frequently experienced derogatory behavior through direct insult and unapproachability from university faculty and staff alike (Bolourian et al., 2018b; Cage & Howes, 2020; Child & Langford, 2011; Couzens et al., 2015; Griffin & Pollak, 2009; Kim & Crowley, 2020; Nuske et al., 2019; Shaw & Anderson, 2018; Vincent et al., 2017; von Below et al., 2021). The denial of accommodation directly impacts the academic achievement and graduation of autistic college students (Cage et al., 2020; Cage & Howes, 2020; Clouder et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2018; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020; Walters, 2015; Zhen et al., 2018).

Summary

This body of work examined how the theoretical framework of Goffman's (1963) social stigma theory, the root of stigmatization, impacts the experiences of the autism community in postsecondary education. Stigmatization defines the treatment, attitudes, bias, and perceived understanding, acceptance, and engagement given by the outside community of the stigmatized (Albrecht et al., 1982; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Elias et al., 2019; Goffman, 1963; Kapp et al., 2013; Marsack & Perry, 2018; Mazumder & Thomas-Hodgetts, 2019; Sasson et al., 2017; Silva et al., 2020;2019; Stockwell et al., 2020; Veelen et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). As diagnosis increases and the prevalence of autistic individuals enter college, these stigmas, attitudes, and behaviors naturally follow (Cox et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). To counteract such stigmas self-advocation and celebration of autism sparked a socio-economic movement that matriculated into an educational movement and theory known as neurodiversity (Blume, 1998; Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Kapp et al., 2013; Singer, 1999). Neurodiversity aims to take on stigma and misconceptions about autism by confronting negative connotations, informing false understandings, and presenting the world with a competent representation of their human variant (Barnhill, 2016; Blume, 1998, Goffman, 1963; Shackelford, 2010; Singer, 1999).

Current literature on stigmas held towards autistic individuals in college communities explain what influences knowledge, awareness, and misconceptions about autism and impacts how peers typically feel and interact socially with autistic peers (Stockwell et al., 2020). Literature shows that stigmas and attitudes towards a willingness to work with and support autistic students is most presently addressed in college staffing awareness and knowledge training (Barnhill, 2016; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Kim, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Shackelford, 2010; Viezel et al., 2020). Literature that confronts faculty held stigmas and perceptions were

mostly outdated and off topic (Elisa et al., 2019; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020; Tipton & Blacher, 2014). Literature's most current findings show that awareness and support programs, knowledge training, and informed educational techniques show a range of marginal to significant improvement in increases autism knowledge, and decreased stigmatization (Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Barnhill, 2016; Elias & White, 2018; Gillespie- Lynch et al., 2015; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Kim, 2021; Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019; Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020; Sasson et al., 2017; Shackelford, 2020; Stockwell et al., 2020; Tipton & Blacher, 2014; Viesel et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019).

The general lack of support strategies to help autistic college students not only transition into higher education but retain this growing student population has teeth in ABA. ABA has been a critical feature in providing support strategies, communication, learning, and social tools for young autistic adults to access long-time success (Cooper et al., 2020; Gorycki et al., 2020; Keenan et al., 2014). Given the breadth of research that supports positive long-term outcomes from ABA interventions, higher education would be remiss if not at least to explore the key tenets of ABA for possible strategies to help support and enfranchise this population (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, n.d.; Cernius, 2017; Elias et al., 2019; Gorycki et al., 2020; Mayville & Letso, 2010; New York State Department of Health Early Intervention Program, 1999; Virués-Ortega, 2010). Lastly, this study would be hollow if it were to neglect the voice of the autistic college student. Overwhelmingly, autistic college students have asserted their need for personalized academic accommodations so that they may be successful (Cage & Howes, 2020; Ford, 2012; Scheef et al., 2019; Viesel et al., 2020). However, there is an alarming trend of general neglect, degradation, disrespect, and unwillingness to help from faculty and staff within

higher education institutions (Bolourian et al., 2018b; Cage et al., 2020; Child & Langford, 2011; Clouder et al., 2020; Couzens et al., 2015; Griffin & Pollak, 2009; Jackson et al., 2018; Kim & Crowley, 2021; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Shaw & Anderson, 2018; Vincent et al., 2015). This dereliction of duty not only impacts academic success and dropout rates, but it also impacts the psychological, emotional health, and well-being (Corrigan et al., 2005; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Jackson et al., 2018; Vincent, 2019), leading to undue social isolation and exclusion of this portion of student populations (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Marsack & Perry, 2018; Silva et al., 2020; 2019; Veelen et al., 2020). Educators and those that support the business of education have a responsibility to lift and enfranchise all students, particularly those who are marginalized (Elias et al., 2019; Holmqvist et al., 2019; Stokowski et al., 2020).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. The problem is higher dropout rates and lower graduation rates for autistic and neurodiverse student populations enrolled in a post-secondary education program, compared to those of their neurotypical peers (Clouder et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2018). Using an intrinsic case study approach allowed for a better understanding of the unique approaches used by Alpha College to generate higher than average graduation rates of autistic students. Chapter Three will describe the qualitative case study design, the central research questions and three sub-research questions from Chapter One will be re-stated. The setting and participants section includes a description of the site and the participants. The personality section includes the interpretive framework, philosophical assumptions, ontological, epistemological, axiological assumptions, and the researcher's role. The procedural section includes permissions, recruitment plan, data collection methods which are individual interviews, document analysis, focus group, and data synthesis. This chapter ends by addressing central issues that address trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical considerations observed while conducting this case study.

Research Design

The qualitative research method was used for the current study as it explored the social phenomenon where Alpha College generates uniquely high graduation rates for a community that has historically earned statically lower in both areas (Clouder et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2018; Kim & Crowley., 2021). This study used an intrinsic case study design because it helped

to guide firsthand experiences and special interest in the case (Stake, 2006). Case study design examines the features "... of the particularity and complexity of a single case" where the researcher seeks to understand the case's activities within a significant circumstance or phenomena (Stake, 1995, p. xi). The intrinsic approach was best suited for the study as the organization is the primary focus of examination (Stake, 1995). A single case was warranted in this circumstance as the phenomenon is specific and "particular" to the features of the case cite (Stake, 1995, p. 3). The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. As a description of how colleges with higher autism enrollment generate increased graduation rates have not been uncovered to the author's knowledge, this intrinsic study provided such description and understanding (Stake, 2006).

Historically, the case study approach has been used to facilitate understanding of real-life cases that describe a unique experience, with the assumption that with understanding comes new contexts about the phenomenon at hand (Yin, 2018). Stake (1995) noted the significance of case study design as a particularly effective way in which to study "educational programs" and is especially adaptable to the examination of "program evaluation" (p. xii). This case study focused on the experiences of the faculty and staff at Alpha College as well as the policies and programs Alpha College has instated to support autistic students to generate higher than usual graduation rates. Graduation rates are not the central phenomenon in this study. Rather, understanding how these elements; perception, attitudes, stigma, knowledge, training, mental health, social isolation, peer perceptions, support programs, pedagogy, and STRs which have been historically difficult for the ASD population attending college and were elevated in the context of this case and represent the unique phenomenon.

The intrinsic case study design was the best fitting approach to this study, as it promoted a more intimate description of how Alpha College supports academic success for their autistic students from the perspective of the faculty, staff, and support programs (Stake, 2006). Personal interests in the case were specific to the perceptions, behaviors, and actions of the faculty and staff of Alpha College as well as the support programs specific to Alpha College that make graduation rates higher than average for autistic students. Intrinsic case study design focuses research on the unique features of a case as part of the whole, without the precedent to generalize its findings (Stake, 2006). Yin (2018) additionally noted that broad generalizations drawn from the findings of an intrinsic case study could create concern in legitimacy. The case study design was best suited for this study to describe the phenomenon from the perspective of the faculty, staff, and existing support programs that were accessed in this case study.

Critically, Alpha College as a whole was represented not only by its faculty and staff but by its established support programs as a key foundation to the description of this case. Intrinsic case studies seek to examine and study a unique case central to the phenomenon (Stake, 2006). There was a personal drive and desire to explore the experiences of Alpha College faculty and staff but also to explore Alpha College as an organization (Yin, 2018). Alpha College's ability to generate higher than average graduation rates for autistic students is a unique case (Stake, 2006). The findings from this study were relative to the data revealed from the faculty and staff of Alpha College (Yin, 2018). The faculty, staff, and established programs served as holistic cases that look at the case in its full entirety (Yin, 2018) as each element was critical to creating a social and academic learning atmosphere that generates high graduation rates for autistic students.

Research Questions

The following section is a reiteration of the current study's central research question and

subsequent three sub-research questions. The central research question and sub-research questions were modeled after Yin's (2014) method for case study, as he noted it is appropriate to ask “how,” “why,” “what,” and “who” questions when the case is bound by time and place. These questions are further guided the driving theories of social stigma theory and neurodiversity and design framework of the current study. Additionally, these questions aim to address the purpose of this intrinsic case stud was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population.

Central Research Question

How does Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generate high graduation rates for its autistic student population?

Sub-Question One

What support programs exist at Alpha College to effectively support graduation rates for its autistic student population?

Sub-Question Two

What activities exist at Alpha College to effectively support graduation rates for its autistic student population?

Sub-Question Three

What perceptions about autism exist at Alpha College to effectively support graduation rates for its autistic student population?

Setting and Participants

To protect the participants and the site, a pseudonym was used for the case. The participants were recruited from the case study site, Alpha College a four-year institution in the southeastern region of the United States. This site features a strong curriculum and academic

mission built on the support and enfranchisement of neurodiverse learners. Alpha College, an accredited southeastern four-year institution that demonstrates complete neurodiverse enrollment with a 69% retention rate, and roughly 65% graduation rate, the average graduation rate of autistic students is 38.8% (Newman, 2011). The neurodiverse enrollment rate includes that of the ASD population at Alpha College. Additionally, Alpha College provides extensive resources and support programs to help neurodiverse students transition into college, first with a program that allows students to try out college during the Summer of Success Program, and transition program that brings the transition process up to 9 months before their high school graduation which provides additional learning and social resources, a holistic learning model, multifaceted support service offices, and a vision statement that promotes and established a learning atmosphere created exclusively for neurodiversity and inclusion. The faculty and staff are highly exposed and experienced with neurodiverse and autistic learners. These features indicated a high assurance that individual participation from an experienced and quality sample size can be reached to attain thematic saturation. The participation pool included current administrative staff from Alpha College, the Human Resources Office, Faculty, the Career Services Office, Learning Specialist Center, Counseling, Occupational Therapy, and the Transition Program. Additional support staff who have a minimum of one year of experience working with students with a formal ASD diagnosis we also pooled. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants participating in the individual interviews from a random selection of commonly used names, while the focus group were assigned a “P” indicator for participant and a numerical value 1-4.

Site

As a single intrinsic case study, the site itself was the central feature of the phenomena being explored using the case study methodology (Yin, 2018). Stake (1995) adds that the case and the site are one in the same as the phenomena being explored is unique to the site and is the

foundation or source of further inquiry (Stake, 1995). The study site was Alpha College, a small college in the suburbs of a southeastern state in the United States. Alpha College is a small institution that is led by a President and Board of Trustees, made up of a Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, and additional members. Alpha College was selected due to its exclusive neurodiversity acceptance and high graduation rate of neurodiverse learners. At Alpha College the entire student body identifies as neurodiverse. Alpha College additionally features expanding course selection from roughly ten majors with small class numbers with roughly 12 to 15 students per class, from a student population of roughly 500 students, with a 11:1 student to faculty ratio. These small numbers and limited course selection create an intimate learning setting. Smaller student and faculty numbers mean that faculty and staff have more contact with the student, providing a higher probability of exposure to students with autism and generating familiarity and social engagement between the students and the educators. Lastly, Alpha College's high neurodiverse population increases the need for institutional support, training, and awareness of common and less common learning differences, making professional development, support programs, and adaptable education in the areas of awareness, knowledge, continued education, pedagogy, social, life skill, self-advocacy, mental health, and academic resources essential.

Participants

The individuals and focus group participants in this study were administrative leaders, faculty, and staff at Alpha College. The current faculty and staff reflect a majority of White and/or Caucasian ethnicity and racial backgrounds, with Black and/or African American background as the second leading demographic, multi-race and Asian backgrounds are marginally represented. The average age range of the faculty and staff was 35-45 with a majority identifying as female. The current pool of participants was identified as having the most intimate

and frequent exposure to the student population (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014; Kim, 2021; Kim & Crowley, 2021). These participants included individuals from the Career Development Center, the Recruitment Center, the Learning Specialist Center, faculty from assorted departments, various student support services, and the Transition Program. The criteria for the participants in the study was that they must have a minimum of 1 year of experience at Alpha College and had experience working with formally diagnosed autistic students. The criteria set for experience was low compared to Elias et al. (2019) and Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) both larger qualitative studies, as Alpha College has a small student population of roughly 500 students, of which 33% are formally diagnosed with ASD. These small numbers reflected a greater probability that faculty and staff at Alpha College had experience working directly with autistic students during a shorter period (Radzinski et al., 2021). The sample size included 11 interview participants from administration, admissions, and student support services as recommended by Yin (2018). Additionally, 4 members of the Transition Program were recruited to participate in the focus group, as suggested by Yin (2018) from the Transition Program to form 1 focus group. These small recruitment numbers were drawn from the small department sizes. Data collection was continued until saturation was met, meaning no new themes, or codes are identified (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Researcher Positionality

The following section addresses the interpretive framework, philosophical assumptions, ontological assumptions, epistemological assumptions, axiological assumptions, and the researcher's role within the study's framework. It is important to understand that each researcher enters a study with a myriad of life experiences that shape their own philosophical views. These experiences influence how the researcher observes and reasons reality. These observations help formulate personal and spiritual beliefs and values, they help conceptualize known and unknown

bias and inform the worldview or lens in which one lives, perceives normality, judges ethics, and understands their own journey as it unfolds. While it is impossible to suspend all philosophical views and beliefs, a researcher must access grace and empathy to understand how a differing viewpoint can be valuable. To do so, one must cultivate an authentic understanding of another's experiences and how those experiences have informed their experiences and perspectives from that of their own. Qualitative research design is the platform for seeking such understanding and grace is its driving force.

Interpretive Framework

As a parent of two children with autism ranging in severity, cognitive, communication, and social deficits, my natural inclination of interpretive framework leaned heavily towards disability interpretive lens where this disability is viewed more as a human difference than a defect (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Positivism was integral as a personal interpretive framework where a single reality remains beyond oneself and informed my ontological assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018) The transformative framework was largely driven by an ultimate purpose and the goal of my research, to let the cultivation of knowledge help people and improve future understanding, develop better conditions, more abundant support, broader awareness, and more inclusive academic programming for autistic learners (Mertens, 2009). My internal calling used during analysis to determine the findings were applied to promote change for my children and others like mine invoke transformative framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Understanding perspectives, what actions and conditions lead to the enfranchisement of the ASD community are only fruitful if something is done with the information. Authoring a book serves no purpose if it is never read. The pragmatism lens focuses on “actions, situations, and consequences of inquiry” (Creswell & Poth, p. 326). Collecting and cultivating existing perceptions, experiences, and actions of a high ASD graduate producing college begs the

question, what is working and the ultimate solution, how can “what works” be replicated (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 326)? These perspectives must speak for themselves without bias or intent and must stand alone if they are to reflect the true nature of the participants' experience and attitudes towards the autistic student population (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Philosophical Assumptions

Creswell and Poth (2018) define philosophical assumptions as those which challenge and question foundational values. Yin (2018) notes these assumptions cause the researcher to expand upon current paradigms to collect, analyze, and interpret the data to shape and understand the research significance. All research starts with the rationale and a margin of directionality gleaned from the perspective and world views of the researcher (Yin, 2018). The current rationale was driven by the cause to describe positive and inspiring findings (Yin, 2018). The following inquiry-based ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions sought to inform current biases.

Ontological Assumption

Ontological assumptions question the nature of one's reality, and that many realities exist because there are endless views or perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the current research demonstrated multiple views of reality based on the participant's perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, personal ontological assumptions were set aside while collecting and analyzing data so that the participant's reality and perspective could be reflected in its raw form without bias or slant. Here, the relationships between Alpha College's administration, faculty, and staff and the autistic student population enrich understanding, awareness, and knowledge of the study's phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This intrinsic case study then served as a tool to uncover unique patterns and themes either unseen or unrealized by the participants (Yin, 2018).

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemological assumptions are cultivated by creating close social bonds with the participants during the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These assumptions developed evidence as it related to knowledge gleaned from fieldwork (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the current study, epistemological orientation allowed for differing orientations to be cultivated through research, here the author embraced a disability interpretive framework, where reality was related to social constructs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The current participant's experiences represented a form of subjective knowledge, discernment allowed for a deeper understanding of their perspective through God's steadfast lens. While the participant may not hold expert credentials in the field of autism awareness, they were the expert of their own interpretations. These interpretations shed light on the current state of the phenomena and shared experience, which further speaks to the trajectory of the social condition existing at the case site.

Axiological Assumption

Axiological assumptions are those existing values one brings into a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher owned these values as they related to the study by reporting and describing these values and any biases that related to or resulted from pre-existing values, particularly while gathering information during the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study approach describes evidence gathered from multiple perceptives (Yin, 2018). Axiological assumptions were seated in my own personal connection and investment in the forward progression of autism research, awareness, and support. My children are both on the autism spectrum and are directly impacted by the current state of autism awareness, inclusion, perspectives, post-secondary educational support, and resources. Therefore, it was pertinent for me to grapple with and overcome the existing perceptions, behaviors, and actions towards autistic college students. However, as an educator and researcher, I was committed to contributing accurate, objective, and transparent research so that authenticity may lead to a

robust understanding of how post-secondary institutions can support and enfranchise college students with autism.

Researcher's Role

As a human instrument, my role was to listen, document, and transcribe the responses from the participants that help directly support and advocate for autistic college students (Yin, 2018). All researchers enter a study with existing biases, perceptions, and expectations (Yin, 2018). It was critical for the health of the study that I remain as transparent as possible about my efforts to mediate personal influence (Yin, 2018). As the researcher, mother of two autistic children, and a special education educator I entered the current study purposefully limiting my own ideals about autism in higher education, so that the participants and the documentation may be seen in raw form (Yin, 2018). I observed the objective and unbiased role of interviewer, data collector, synthesizer, and confidant during the data collection process (Yin, 2018). Here I based my process in Yin (2018) who describes, “a good listener” meaning I will engage, process, and “assimilate” copious information without bias (p. 83). This role was informed by elements of my pragmatic view, where I seek to cultivate a better social environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Memoing allowed me to delineate my personal biases from the data, so that I was able to recognize themes arising more clearly from the interviews and focus group (Saldaña, 2021; Yin, 2018).

The intrinsic case study research design lent itself well to a rich descriptive and explorative data collection approach to glean a deeper understanding of the case in its entirety (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). This rich and thick descriptive method allowed analysis to be cultivated from a breadth of data (Yin, 2018). I coded deductive and inductively, letting the assumed themes revealed by the literature be informed by an openness to observing new themes from the data (Saldaña, 2021). Positionally, I neither previously nor currently hold any authority

over the participants or within the Alpha College community. I did not have any personal ties or connections with Alpha College faculty or staff. I also had no influence or power over the participants, nor the documents used during the data collection process. Therefore, I had no ability to manipulate the participants' perspective or the provided statistical evidence provided by Alpha College documents. Existing lines of trust and professional courtesy were respected and honored while ensuring privacy and discretion were cultivated to the utmost possible extent.

Procedures

The following procedural section outlines the steps to which this study was conducted so that necessary replication of studies like this or literary gaps may have a baseline study for which to derive their own research. Here, I included the necessary Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval provided in Appendix A, site permission, how participants were solicited, techniques for data collection, data analysis, and rationale for how the study was triangulates in its findings.

Permissions

The current study received permission from the director of the Transition Program at Alpha College through phone conversation. The study further received formal permission from Alpha College's IRB and the Provost by presenting the current research proposal to Alpha College's IRB. Upon Alpha College's IRB approval, I sent a follow up email to the Provost of Alpha College and the Director of the Transition Program at Alpha College to establish permission, gain rapport, trust, and initiate the recruitment process. The site approval letter was included in Appendix B. Furthermore, the site approval letter outlined the purpose, procedures of the current study, provided a promissory of confidentiality, and the approval letter from Liberty's IRB which was included in Appendix A.

Recruitment Plan

The main method of participant recruitment was the purposeful sampling method. A

sample group was intentionally identified with the help from the site gatekeeper (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case study the gatekeeper was the provost for Alpha College. The purposive sample offers an informed perspective and experience with the current research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Due to the small sample pool of faculty and staffing at Alpha College and Transition, snowball sampling, and personal connections were then used to identify additional participants to enrich the purposeful sample (Creswell, 2018). Snowballing and the personal connection methods build the participant pool by building trust, relationships, rapport, and value in the current study with the site gatekeeper (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As I built rapport and relationships at Alpha College, it was through word of mouth and referral that more faculty and staff who are invested in Alpha College's unique phenomena and the cause to enrich neurodiverse learners willing and eagerly agreed to be screened and recruited for participation. Initial contact was made by email, virtual face-to-face inquiry, and followed up with a phone call. Participants who showed interest in the study were given a consent form located in Appendix C, for those who wished to consider participation they were given a follow-up phone call and upon verbal agreement sent an email with the consent form attached located in Appendix C.

For this study 12 to 15 participants were recommended by Liberty University to ensure focused qualitative inquiry were reached while ensuring the point of data saturation was met (Yin, 2018). Personal interviews allowed for rich comparison within the case study and offer sufficient data to promote an in-depth understanding of the phenomena (Patton, 2015). Each participant in the individual interviews represented a member from at least 2 of the 3 departmental offices; the administration, admission, and support services (Yin, 2018). The focus group was pooled from the faculty and staff from the Transition Program. Purposeful criterion sampling method, snowballing, and personal connection sampling techniques were used, where

the participants were drawn from the same agency and additionally possessed an intimate depth of knowledge of the phenomena at hand (Palinkas et al. 2013; 2016). The faculty and staff at Alpha College represented a highly experienced and accessible sample pool where a range of autistic students were present due to the overall makeup of the student population. The current sample pool of faculty, support staff, and the Transition Program staff at Alpha College was roughly 60 people.

Data Collection Plan

There were six sources of evidence from which case study research may draw data: documentation, interviews, archival records, observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2018). The four principles of data collection first required the use of multiple sources of evidence where research was triangulated by various resources, participants, methods, investigators, theories to corroborate, validate findings, themes, and accuracy of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The second principle required the creation or use of a case study base of data that separated and organized the data using an evidentiary computer program as well as articles, books, visual, oral, and handwritten reports (Yin, 2018). The third principle described the need for researchers to maintain the chain of evidence where leading evidence and research questions were organized and tracked separately from original or initial research questions (Yin, 2018). The fourth principle called for the researcher to take extended care, caution, and discernment when utilizing data gathered from social media platformed like ZOOM, Skype, or Microsoft Teams and online chats for interpersonal interactions (Yin, 2018). Caution and discernment were extended to other online sources and sites like Wikipedia and social media sites like Niche (2022). Cross-checking consistency in online materials and websites for bias, slant, and incompleteness boosted confidence in the current findings and themes (Yin, 2018).

Stake (1995) noted that qualitative research takes pride in its ability to cultivate, discover, and portray multiple views and perspectives of a case. According to Yin (2018), the use of multiple data collection methods increases reliability in the current case study. Therefore, in this qualitative intrinsic case study, I employed document analysis, individual interviews, and a focus group (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) prioritized the data collection methods for a case study's starting with documentation as it plays a prominent role in any data collection plan as the initial medium for establishing, expanding, developing, synthesizing, and corroborating research evidence (Yin, 2018). The documentation requested included but was not limited to professional development, enrollment and graduation records, student support resource websites from both Alpha College and the Transition Program.

Document Analysis Plan

The data analysis plan for the document analysis approach upon receiving consent from Alpha Colleges IRB to conduct a case study of Alpha College, I emailed the provost, who was one of my central points of contact at the college. The provost heads the professional development for the entire faculty and staff. I requested training schedules and meeting minutes for professional development as well as policy guidelines. The provost provided professional development meeting schedules that documented annual and continued training topics. From the Transition Program, I also requested training and professional development documentation, located in Appendix F. From the sites website I was able to access all information regarding admissions, programing, fees, and enrollment for the Transition Program. Additionally, I was able to retrieve general student demographics, enrollment, and graduation statistics as well as faculty and staff statistics, and literature on all student services offices such as the Career Development Center, THRIVE, Learning Specialists Center, tutoring services, the writing center, community awareness and outreach, counseling services, HR programing and hiring protocol,

OT services, and fitness and mental well-ness services. I attached a copy of the IRB approval letter to the email and a request to the Provost, Transition Program, and Career Development Offices. I was able to access general enrollment records and statistics from over the last 5 years from the school's website. From the Transition Program, I was able to access enrollment and dropout numbers from over the last 5 years, the organizational mission, structure, policies, and recruitment was all additionally accessed and from Alpha College's website and its various sub-content pages. Document analysis was triangulated using analytical memos, overlapping documents from both physical and digital information, interviews, and the focus group.

Document Analysis Data Analysis Plan

Documentation has a significant role in case study design because it provides documented material and information unique, stable, and therefore critical to gleaning insight into understanding the case itself (Yin, 2018). Due to the nature of this study and the described behaviors and actions that are the foundation of Alpha College's governing policies, enrollment numbers, professional development, and management of their support programs, documentation was a significant reflection of Alpha College's development and management of their unique phenomena (Yin, 2018). The documentation was qualitatively analyzed as supportive analyses to isolate any pre-existing biases or assumptions about the programs or how they are run (Yin, 2018). Document analysis used digital resource documents that outlined training schedules and professional development topics, as well as enrollment and graduation records, all student support resource websites from both Alpha College, and the Transition Program.

The document analysis began by using analytical memos to process the documents provided by the Transition Program, and the site website. These memos served to help glean insight into the phenomenon, participant, and case through writing (Saldaña, 2021). "Memos are data," data for which can be coded, categorized, and searched in Delve (2022) (Saldaña, 2021, p.

59). Memoing helped while analyzing the documents and websites drawn from the Eclectic Codes and include the reflection and writing of a descriptive summary of data, roles, emergent patterns, categories, themes, concepts, assertions, possible networks, and processes among the codes, patterns, categories, themes, concepts, assertions, and related existing theories (Saldaña, 2021). The codes gleaned from document analysis were uploaded into Delve (2022) to help organize data for more efficient data synthesis. Document analysis from Alpha College answered the central research question, how does Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generate high graduation rates for its autistic student population, by offering firm evidence of policy, program structures, enrollment, and graduation numbers generated by Alpha College.

Individual Interview Plan

Interviews are a critical element in data collection and analysis and were therefore used in this study (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018). The data collection approach for individual interviews was carried out using a combination of Saldaña (2021), Stake (1995), and Yin (2018). The intrinsic case study design was tested against the four central criteria, for ensuring the quality and efficacy of the study (Yin, 2018). The first criteria, construct validity identifies the correct operational measures for the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The second criteria where internal validity seeks to establish a causal relationship where the condition of the concept leads to the condition of another, typically from the presents of an unseen variable for which the study seeks to unveil (Yin, 2018). The third criteria were external validity, which demonstrates how the findings may be generalized by asking and answering the “how” and “why” questions driving the case study and consequently thin interview questions (Yin, 2018, p. 45). The fourth criteria were reliability, which is the demonstration and repeatability of the study’s operations so that features like data collection can be replicated (Yin, 2018).

Once the initial selection of potential participants was identified through purposeful, snowball, and personal connection sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) formal permission was obtained in writing by each participant. Each participant was provided with a letter describing the drive, intent, and procedures behind the current study, the benefits to society. Participants were given a formal consent form attached in an email along with Alpha College's IRB approval letter, located in Appendix C. I then followed- up with the participants to schedule individual interviews virtually with Microsoft- Teams, at a time, or by an alternative preferred virtual method of the participant's choosing. The interviews ranged in length from 30 to 40 minutes depending on the level of openness and content the interviewee wished to offer (Marsack & Perry, 2018). The following individual interview questions were adapted from Elias et al (2019) and Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014) studies. Interviews were audio-recorded through the Microsoft Teams audio-recording application (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Field notes were taken to additionally supplemental the transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018) as part of a pre-coding and preliminary jotting technique recommended by Saldaña (2021).

These questions were asked to introduce the participant, learn what brought them to Alpha College, understand their first encounter with an autistic student, how that experience shaped the perspective on autism, what services Alpha College offers autistic students, their role in the support, what are Alpha College's greatest strengths and weaknesses in advocating and supporting autistic students? The final question asked how they have been prepared to manage autistic students. These questions aimed to cultivate a descriptive understanding of the administration's, faculty, and staff perspectives, support programs and policies of the college, training, and behaviors towards their autistic students. A pilot interview was not conducted as the margin of participation was narrow and all data collected was utilized to the utmost extent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lastly, in exchange for using the responsive interviewing model, the

length of the interviews allowed for flexibility, as the interviewee became more comfortable, reflected on their personal and professional contributions, the minutia of details, how Alpha College and the Transition Program support and advocate for autistic students, institutional expectations, work atmosphere, and perspectives. The interview questions were pre-written and are found in Appendix D. Using a semi-structured format allowed for personal anecdotes and new themes to appear organically at the interviewee's discretion (Yin, 2018). Interviews were triangulated using memoing, field notes, and audio-recordings along with the two additional data collection methods, document analysis, and focus group to establish a breadth of trustworthiness and credibility.

Semi-structured, Interview Questions

1. Based on your experience of working at Alpha College, how would you describe Alpha College? SQ3
2. What does Alpha College do best? SQ1
3. What role do you play in supporting autistic students? SQ2
4. What campus social activities does Alpha College sponsor to help autistic students form peer relationships? SQ2
5. What academic activities does Alpha College have to help autistic students succeed? SQ2
6. Please describe your first encounter with an autistic student. SQ3
7. How did that experience shape your feelings and opinions about autism? SQ3
8. Describe some of the biggest academic challenges you have seen students with ASD face. SQ3
9. Describe some of the hardest social struggles you have witnessed students with ASD confront. Please use any anecdotes or observations you have made. SQ3

10. Why do you think Alpha College is able to keep autistic students from dropping out?

CRQ

11. Why do you think Alpha College generates a higher graduation rate of autistic students than other colleges? CRQ

12. Where do you see the most support, resources, and help given to students with ASD?

SQ3

13. What professional support, training, or guidance have you received pertaining specifically to ASD? SQ1

14. What support, resources, and services would you like to see added to Alpha College's services? SQ2

15. How has Alpha College prepared you to manage and help autistic students? Is training continual? SQ1

Question one asked the participant to articulate their perception about Alpha College, which calls for them to access their connection with perception (Cage & Howes, 2020; Elias et al., 2019) and action (Barnhill, 2016; Clouder et al., 2020). Question two asked what services meaning actions and behaviors are offered to support autistic students (Lai et al., 2020, Nah & Tan, 2021). Questions three, four, and five asked about educational action through support activities as nurtured through neurodiversity theory (Blume, 1998; Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Kapp et al., 2013; Singer, 1999). Questions six, seven, eight, and nine asked about the perception behind autism and are rooted in the formation, which is directly linked to social stigma theory (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Goffman, 1963; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). Questions ten and eleven asked about high graduation rates, which are the central research question and are rooted in the cross-section between perception and action (Cage & Howes, 2020; Clouder et al., 2020). Questions twelve

asked about the perception behind autism and are rooted in the formation, which is directly linked to social stigma theory (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Goffman, 1963; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). Question thirteen asked what services meaning actions and behaviors are offered to support autistic students (Lai et al., 2020, Nah & Tan, 2021). Question fourteen asked about educational action through support activities as nurtured through neurodiversity theory (Blume, 1998; Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Kapp et al., 2013; Singer, 1999). Question fifteen asked what services meaning actions and behaviors are offered to support autistic students (Lai et al., 2020, Nah & Tan, 2021).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis plan used was the critical protocol of a case study (Yin, 2018). The steps for analysis of a case study combined the examination, categorization, tabulation, testing, or recombining narrative and numeric evidence (Yin, 2018). The benefit of case study research was that it allowed more freedom from an abundance of restrictive analytical rules seen in other research methods (Yin, 2018). I began by manipulating the data to find or reveal common “patterns, insights, or concepts” that helped guide and inform the “what” and the “why” of the study (Yin, 2018, p. 164). The four general strategies of case study research are to rely on theoretical propositions, work the data from the bottom up, develop a case description, and examine opposing explanations (Yin, 2018). Utilizing the computer aid helped to manipulate large quantities of data, although the human element remained the key to recognizing pertinent codes or themes, and then interpreting the observed patterns to derive insight into the case (Yin, 2018). Additionally, the four general strategies were then used to inform the five specific techniques for analyzing a case study where “pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis” are used (Yin, 2018, p. 164). The key challenge was to attend to all evidence collected both at the baseline and emerging, investigate opposing

interpretations, address the significant aspects of the case study, and demonstrate familiarity with current and prevalent literature and concepts that pertain to the case study topic (Yin, 2018).

I used coding as a qualitative data analytical activity, as Wetson et al. (2001) noted that there is a “reciprocal relationship between the development of a coding system and the evolution of understanding a phenomenon” (p. 397). I additionally used a precoding technique and memoing or preliminary jotting during the interviews as a source of field notes, to accompany the use of interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2021). The interviews were transcribed using Stake’s (1995) approach to create more time efficiency, transparency, and accuracy of the data. To achieve this, interviews were audio-recorded using Microsoft Teams audio-recording application during all virtual interviews (Burnard, 1991). I additionally compared interviews to reveal any reoccurring patterns or themes for categorical aggregation, where findings potentially answer the driving central and three sub-research questions (Stake, 1995).

First, I organized the data collected in the interviews, focus group, and document analysis into specific units, words, or sentences (Yin, 2018). I used the computer database Delve (2022) to organize the data. Delve (2022) is a software database that helps organize findings to allow researchers to analyze qualitative data rigorously and with human insight. During the first stage of analysis, I read over the audio-recording transcripts taken during the interviews and focus group to establish major themes that emerge. Themes are broad units of information that consist of several codes that form a common idea (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I took notes in the margins to facilitate a simple retrieval of emerging themes from the transcripts. The next stage of analysis included coding, where I aggregated the text into categories of information (Yin, 2018). The codes represented the main idea from the data and were labeled to include additional themes that form the aggregate (Yin, 2018). I then reviewed the aggregated codes and look for new or established themes that align with the initial 11 pre-codes. The initial eleven pre-codes include:

perception (Cage & Howes, 2020; Elias et al., 2019; Nah & Tan, 2021), attitude (Chung et al., 2015; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Mulholland & Cummin, 2016; Saade et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019), stigma (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019), knowledge (Crompton et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2018; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2019), training (Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020), mental health (Corrigan et al., 2005; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Jackson et al., 2018; Vincent, 2019), social isolation (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Marsack & Perry, 2018; Silva et al., 2020; 2019; Veelen et al., 2020), peer relationships (Crompton et al., 2020; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Jackson et al., 2018; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019); support programs (Jackson et al., 2018; Kim, 2021; Kim & Yoon, 2021; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Viezel; et al., 2020), pedagogy (Anderson et al. 2019; Cox et al., 2020; Walters, 2015), and STRs (Anderson et al., 2019; Elias et al., 2019; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Zeedyk et al., 2019).

Focus Group Plan

The data analysis plan for the focus group was used upon completion of the individual interviews and in tantum with retrieval of the documents. Access for recruiting the focus group members began by reaching out to the Directors of the Transition Program to initiate interest in participation in the current study. According to Yin (2018), the researcher must retain a minimum of 4 participants with a maximum of 5 participants for the focus group. The Director of the Transition Program recommended and introduced me to the lead support staff member of the Transition Program through email. The lead support staff member of the Transition Program created a group email of potential participants to help initiate recruitment. I then joined the potential participants through email to obtain introduce myself and my study briefly, I then

sought formal consent for those interested in participation. Those who wished to participate followed up with a schedule itinerary, the IRB approval and formal consent letter was attached to the email. The description of the intent and procedures of the current study and is located in Appendix C. Participant 1 coordinated the schedules of the other members of the focus group through email, once a time was agreed I sent an invite to the group through Microsoft Teams. The meeting took place at the most convenient time, space, and platform conducive for the group. The meeting took roughly 40 minutes to complete and varied in participant openness, content, and directionality (Marsack & Perry, 2018). The meeting was audio-recorded using the Teams recording feature (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I took supplemental field notes (Creswell & Poth, 2018) as part of a pre-coding by using memoing or preliminary jotting technique (Saldaña, 2021). The following questions were provisional and semi-structured. Data analysis included analytical memos to process the findings gleaned from the focus group meeting. Data analysis from the focus group was then triangulated using the data and themes collected from interviews, document analysis, audio- recording, and analytical memos.

Focus Group Semi-Structured Questions

1. What role does your department play in helping autistic students at Alpha College? SQ1
2. How often does your department interact with autistic students? SQ2
3. What are the biggest challenges autistic students face entering college? SQ3
4. What are the greatest advantages autistic students have when entering college? SQ3
5. What are the most common services, activities, or accommodations your department provides for autistic students at Alpha College? SQ1
6. What makes Alpha College effective at supporting autistic students to complete

their degrees? CRQ

7. What could your department or Alpha College do better to support higher graduation rates of autistic students? SQ1 & SQ2

Question one asked what the role of the department and how the services meaning actions and behaviors they offer support autistic students (Lai et al., 2020, Nah & Tan, 2021). Question two asked about educational action through support activities as nurtured through neurodiversity theory (Blume, 1998; Clouder et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Kapp et al., 2013; Singer, 1999). Questions three and four asked about the perception behind autism and are rooted in the formation, which is directly linked to social stigma theory (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Goffman, 1963; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019). Question five additionally inquired about services that are offered to help support academic achievement for autistic students (Lai et al., 2020; Nah & Tan, 2021). Question six asked directly about high graduation rates, which are the central research question and is rooted in the cross-section between perception and action (Cage & Howes, 2020; Clouder et al., 2020). Finally, question seven asked about institutional programs and activities as is grounded in perceptions that lead to action and reflected both social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) and neurodiversity theoretical contexts working hand in hand to understand the phenomena taking place more deeply at Alpha College (Singer, 1999).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

Focus group recruitment gathered a small group of 4 members of the Transition Program faculty and staff, with the goal of invoking the views of the individuals (Yin, 2018). I acted as the moderator of the group discussion while intentionally working to draw out the perception and meaning of the participant (Yin, 2018). I paid attention closely to these perceptions and meanings by balancing awareness of prolonged familiarity and reflexivity, avoiding subtle and

mutually exchanged influences between myself and the participant (Yin, 2018). The data collection approach for the focus group began by analyzing the audio-recording transcripts using analytical reasoning. Here, I again used the Eclectic Codes used in the document analysis approach (Saldaña, 2021). Data analysis from the interviews and document analysis informed more accurate and rich conversation and questions (Yin, 2018). Preliminary focus group semi-structured questions were provided to establish a baseline and were to be built upon during the interview process, see focus group semi-structured questions in Appendix E. Additionally, analytical memos allowed inductive codes to emerge upon reflection and analysis of the audio-recordings and field notes (Saldaña, 2021). Insights were gleaned into how Alpha College perceived, manages, and supports its ASD population cross-institutionally.

Data Synthesis

The steps for data analysis of a case study combine the examination, categorization, tabulation, testing, or recombining narrative and numeric evidence (Yin, 2018). I began by manipulating the data to find or reveal common “patterns, insights, or concepts” that helped guide and inform the “what” and the “why” of the study (Yin, 2018, p. 164). I then reviewed the transcribed interviews and field notes as part of the analysis phase (Yin, 2018). The interviews as well as the focus group were transcribed using audio-recording to ensure transcription accuracy (Yin, 2018). Identifiable patterns from the interviews and the focus group were also transcribed using the data collected from both collection techniques (Yin, 2018). Saldaña (2021) noted the benefits of analytical memos, as they attribute to a deeper, more meaningful processing of the information, as well as their tendency to reveal new themes among research confusion, themes or concepts that first appear to be outliers suddenly fit and fill out a category upon analytical reflection cultivated through writing. Field notes were also used during the interviews and focus

group data collections as a tool to record information and insights happening in real-time (Creswell & Poth, 2018), as I am a tool for coding data myself, (Saldaña, 2021).

Lastly, time efficacy and management were improved by using Delve (2022) database. Delve was a beneficial data analysis tool as it has a coding assistant that helps code, store, articulate themes visually by graphics to thicken the context of the data and organize copious amounts of data collected from the interviews, document analysis, and focus group collection sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Delve allowed me to nest and merge codes using one word or short phrases to articulate the theme's central concept streamlining the codes and sharpening the clarity (Delve, 2022). These four strategies were then used to inform the five specific techniques for analyzing a case study where "pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis" are used (Yin, 2018, p. 164). The key challenge was to attend to all evidence collected both at the baseline and emerging, investigate opposing interpretations, address the significant aspects of the case study, and demonstrate familiarity with current and prevalent literature and concepts that pertain to the case study topic (Yin, 2018).

Trustworthiness

The current study represents a rigorous commitment to ensuring transparency. As the case study site also received a pseudonym, each participant received a pseudonym to protect their privacy and ensure trust. The participant's privacy was considered and upheld with the utmost respect. Objectivity, unbiased, and organic representation have been the central aim during the data collection process. The participant's words, experiences, and perspectives will be dictated, synthesized, expressed, and presented in their true intent. Any analysis, understanding, meaning, or context has been derived with integrity, grace, and humility. It is the author's truest

intent to preserve a holistic and trustworthy pursuit of academic research for the enfranchisement of all participants and stakeholders.

Credibility

To establish credibility, I will use triangulation observation and prolonged observation (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). To do so individual interviews will be informal, relaxed, and substantial so that the research builds trust and rapport with the participant. Trust and rapport cultivated from the participant encourage openness and transparency in how much they are willing to share (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). This is done by the intentional suspension of personal bias, to allow the participant's truth to come through without sway or intention. Prolonged observation will be realized through deep exposure and research into the innerworkings of Alpha College. While the interviews and focus group contribute to this, document analysis fuels the fire as much can be gleaned about the individual or organization by analyzing the values and needs, they put together through policy (Saldaña, 2021).

Transferability

Transferability is the demonstration that information used in one context can also be applicable in another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, transferability is achieved by sharing thick descriptions of the participants' experiences and perceptions of the phenomena in interviews, document analysis, and focus group. I will additionally provide the descriptions of the setting, relationships, and atmosphere witnessed during the focus group meetings.

Dependability

To truly achieve dependability the current study must be replicated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The driving purpose and goal of this current case study should be examined through the lens of other college and higher education institutions. To deepen dependability the research would need to find another institution with high autism acceptance and graduation rates.

Additionally, the research must consider the degree of neurodiverse to autism population. Although autism will be isolated, many of these themes affect graduation rates through neurodiverse communities (Clouder et al., 2020).

Confirmability

Confirmability is the ability of the researcher to maintain a high level of neutral intent during the data collection, analysis, and synthesis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used multiple levels of triangulation through audio-recordings, analytical memos, data collection, and reflexivity to ensure confirmability of the current case study. Reflexivity is purposeful mindfulness exercised by the researcher to attend to their personal perspective during each phase of the research process (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). I employed conscious mindfulness so that my personal perspectives do not sway or lead the participants or my findings during the analysis process.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical considerations are upheld in the utmost regard the research will obtain site consent to access, provide a letter detailing the intent, purpose, process for which the study will be undertaken. I will not begin data collection until IRB approval from both Liberty University and Alpha College is retained. Each participant will be informed that their participation is voluntary, and they are free to withdraw from the study at any point in time. Additionally, the participant and site will be assured that confidentiality will be protected by data security measures where electronic data will be stored in a password-protected computer file to which I have exclusive access. Physical data such as field notes, transcripts, memos, and participation keys will be stored in a secured locked filing cabinet to which only the research has access (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pre-selected pseudonyms arranged from A to K for the interview group. The focus group were assigned a “P” indicator for participant and the numerical

value for which they were recruited 1-4. Pseudonyms and numerical identifiers were used to ensure that the site and the participant's identity were concealed, and they received the due respect and privacy they are entitled to in providing critical insights into an emerging field of study. Participant pseudonym key for the individual interview group and focus group are in Appendix G and H. Lastly, I will destroy digital and physical files and documents after 3 years of finalizing the current research.

Summary

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. Document analysis was completed using digital and physical documents from the various student support services webpages, professional development training, outlines, and guidance was provided through the participants who deliver the training, HR hiring protocol, training, and professional development were linked through web pages found on both Alpha College and the Transition Programs', website resources pages. The focus group was comprised of 4 members of Alpha College's Transition Program, while the individual interviews were comprised of administrative, support staff, faculty, and counselors. This qualitative intrinsic case study used semi-structured interviews consisting of 15 research questions for the individual interviews, while the focus group had 7 semi-structured questions. The interviews, document analysis, and the focus group were analyzed by me to find reoccurring patterns and themes through pre-coding, preliminary jotting, field notes, and analytical memos. These techniques were used as input into Delve the qualitative analysis database, to help synthesize the data and determine the answer to the central research question and sub-questions. All data was collected and analyzed using pseudonyms and thorough safety measures to ensure the privacy of the participants. God tells his children, "[g]ive, and it will be given to you. Good

measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure, you use it will be measured back to you” (*English Standard Version*, 2022, Luke 6:38).

Therefore, good research undertaken with God’s lens, intention, and his work at heart will be fruitful.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. Chapter Four describes Alpha College and the participants (see Figure 1), the residual themes resulting from three data collection methods; individual interviews, focus group, and document analysis. Additionally, Chapter Four describes the outliers that emerged from the data, research questions from both the individual interviews and focus group, and a brief summation to conclude the findings.

Figure 1 Participant Overview

Individual Interview	11 Participants
----------------------	-----------------

Participants

Fifteen participants were recruited and selected using snowball sampling from the provost at Alpha College. The individual interview recruitment process began with a list of recommended participants from the provost at Alpha College. Participant recommendations were

provided as I established personal connections, trust, and reliability cultivated during email correspondence where I shared my personal and professional heartfelt and sincere journey with neurodiversity and autism research. Participants for the focus group were snowballed through the personal connections cultivated with the director of the Transition Program who connected me with the lead support staff member who was Participant 1 from the Transition Program.

Participant 1 helped snowball three additional members from the Transition Program staff by using the criteria provided and creating a group email chain with potential participants. I was included in the email chain, where I presented my background, description of the study, criteria to participate, and a formal request for participation. For those interested in participating I attached Alpha College's IRB approval letter (See Appendix B) and the formal consent form (See Appendix C). Pseudonyms were selected for the individual interview participants from a randomized list of common names used alphabetically. The focus group participants received a "P" indicator representing their participant status and a numerical value 1 through 4 indicating their order of recruitment. The pseudonym Alpha College was assigned to the case site as a representation of my military background. Pseudonyms and numerical identifiers were used in place of the site and participants legal names to protect the site as its small size would put it at risk for reidentification in addition to protecting the participants privacy and ensure their confidentiality (Yin, 2018).

Of the potential 35 participants, 4 administrative student support staff members, 1 administrative staff member from the non-student support department, 2 support staff members, and 4 faculty members agreed to participate in the individual interviews. Table 1 reflects important features, years of employment, professional position, age, gender, and experience working with students formally diagnosed with ASD. Individual interview participants which include professional position, age-range and identified gender. Additionally, Table 1 reflects the

criteria for the individual interviews, that potential participants must also have a minimum of 1 year of experience at Alpha College and have experience working with formally diagnosed autistic students.

Table 1

Individual Interview Participants

Participant	Years Employed	Professional Position	Age Range	Gender	ASD Experience
Ashton	4	Administrative Support	25-35	M	Y
Brittany	9	Faculty	35-45	F	Y
Carol	3	Support Staff	35-45	F	Y
Diane	1	Support Staff	25-35	F	Y
Ethan	2	Faculty	35-45	M	Y
Francis	2	Administrative Staff	55-65	F	Y
Gino	10	Faculty	55-65	M	Y
Hank	4	Administrative Support	35-45	M	Y
Ivana	6	Administrative Support	35-45	F	Y
Jill	2	Faculty	45-55	F	Y
Karl	7	Administrative Support	55-65	M	Y

The criteria for the focus group were that the potential participant must have a minimum of 1 year of experience working in the Transition Program and experience working with formally

diagnosed autistic students. I asked five potential participants for the focus group; I included the Director of the Transition Program and 4 staff members of the Transition Program. Four of the 5 potential participants agreed to participate: 3 administrative support staff members and 1 support staff member. Table 2 reflects essential features, including years of employment, professional position with the Transition Program, age, gender, and experience with formally diagnosed autistic students for the focus group participation. Additionally, Table 2 demonstrates that each focus group participant met the required criteria for participation.

Table 2

Focus Group Participants

Participant	Years Employed	Transition Program Position	Age Range	Gender	ASD Experience
P1	4	Administrative Support	35-45	F	Y
P2	3	Administrative Support	35-45	F	Y
P3	1	Support Staff	45-55	F	Y
P4	3	Administrative Support	35-45	M	Y

Results

I was the human instrument for data analysis and coding. Saldana (2016) noted the importance of the researcher maintaining “more control over and ownership of the work” when the research is the central tool for coding (p. 29). Delve was used to organize participant transcripts, cross-reference audio recordings, field notes, and analytical memoing. Delve’s primary function was to organize the data to streamline the coding process. The coding process revealed residual themes and assuaged quick access to direct quotes from within each theme.

Two key themes from this case study were holistic education and faculty support. Additionally, there were four sub-themes from this case study, complete individualization,

complete support services, professional development, and self-reflection. Narrowing the themes from the original pre-codes was a difficult time-riddled process. As the human instrument I had to analyze the deeper implications of each pre-code and each initial theme that emerged from the data. Appendix I shows how I began to analyze the themes found in the individual interviews starting with the initial themes found in the literature to impact low graduation rates of autistic college students. The eleven initial pre-codes included: perception (Cage & Howes, 2020; Elias et al., 2019; Nah & Tan, 2021), attitude (Chung et al., 2015; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Mulholland & Cummin, 2016; Saade et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019), stigma (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019), knowledge (Crompton et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2018; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2019), training (Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020), mental health (Corrigan et al., 2005; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Jackson et al., 2018; Vincent, 2019), social isolation (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Marsack & Perry, 2018; Silva et al., 2020; 2019; Veelen et al., 2020), peer relationships (Crompton et al., 2020; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Jackson et al., 2018; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019); support programs (Jackson et al., 2018; Kim, 2021; Kim & Yoon, 2021; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Viezel; et al., 2020), pedagogy (Anderson et al. 2019; Cox et al., 2020; Walters, 2015), and student STRs (Anderson et al., 2019; Elias et al., 2019; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Vadjal & Radoja, 2020; Zeedyk et al., 2019). See Table 3.

Table 3

Research Questions Thematic Alignment

Themes	Sub-Themes	Research Question
Holistic Education	Complete Individualization	CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3 CRQ, SQ1, SQ2, SQ3

Faculty Support	Complete Support Services	CRQ, SQ1, SQ2
	Professional Development	CRQ
	Self-Reflection	CRQ, SQ2, SQ3 CRQ, SQ1

Through deep reflection and analytical memoing, I drew connections between the pre-codes and new themes that emerged from the individual interviews. I repeated this process when I analyzed the data from the focus group and again during document analysis. I found that many pre-codes overlapped or reiterated central concepts found in the new themes. For example, STRs, are positive relationships that exist between the student and the faculty member. Therefore, STRs reflect positive perceptions and attitudes toward students with ASD. These positive perceptions and attitudes create conditions for student enfranchisement (Clouder et al., 2020; Mazumder & Thompson-Hodgetts, 2019; Stockwell et al., 2020; S. W. White et al., 2011). Revisiting the literature and theoretical frameworks helped keep the data analysis closely aligned with the driving theories. I streamlined the initial eleven pre-codes from the literature, (Cage & Howes, 2020; Elias et al., 2019; Nah & Tan, 2021), attitude (Chung et al., 2015; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Mulholland & Cummin, 2016; Saade et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019), stigma (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2021; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019), knowledge (Crompton et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2018; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019; Zeedyk et al., 2019), training (Roth et al., 2018; Saade et al., 2020), mental health (Corrigan et al., 2005; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Jackson et al., 2018; Vincent, 2019), social isolation (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Chamak & Bonniau, 2016; Marsack & Perry, 2018; Silva et al., 2020; 2019; Veelen et al., 2020), peer relationships (Crompton et al., 2020; Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Jackson et al., 2018; Stockwell et al., 2020; D. White et al., 2019); support programs (Jackson et al., 2018; Kim, 2021; Kim & Yoon, 2021; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021; Roth et al., 2018; Viezel; et al., 2020), pedagogy (Anderson et al. 2019; Cox et al., 2020; Walters, 2015), and student STRs (Anderson

et al., 2019; Elias et al., 2019; Kingsbury et al., 2020; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017; Vadnjal & Radoja, 2020; Zeedyk et al., 2019). These pre-codes are residual barriers to academic achievement for autistic college students. The new themes emerged by focusing my analysis on how Alpha College has confronted and resolved each of these eleven barriers to academic achievement, so that perception drives positive action, generating increased academic achievement (Goffman, 1964). The two key themes, holistic education and faculty supports are the two areas where the data demonstrates how perception and action produce student success. Each of the residual pre-codes and new themes fell under one of these two themes. The success experienced by the students at Alpha College occurs because Alpha College takes a holistic education approach in how they completely support the success and well-being of the individual student through complete individualization and complete support services. Additionally, the holistic education approach bolsters the support of the students through their faculty support approach. The faculty support approach provides extensive professional development, resources, supports, training, to develop faculty knowledge. The better the faculty and staff are trained, the better they can serve the individual student and in effect the entire neurodiverse and in this case ASD population. Self-reflection is a critical feature on how Alpha College helps develop and support their faculty and staff as it encourages the faculty and staff to share areas of improvement, offer solutions, and refine the holistic education approach. Lastly, humility and grace as a cultural presence at Alpha College create an environment where self-reflection breeds knowledge, understanding, problem-solving, and progress.

Lastly, two outliers were identified as: *no added resources* and *love*. The outlier *no added resources* are defined as the idea that the faculty do not need additional resources to help deliver a holistic education to the individual student with neurodiverse learning differences. The second outlier *love* is defined as an emotional regulation that drives the faculty and staff's motivation for

helping the faculty member deliver a holistic education to individual student with neurodiverse learning differences.

Holistic Education

The first theme that was identified is holistic education and is defined by the researcher as the instruction, nurturing, growth, and assistance of the entire students' academic, social, physical, mental, and emotional well-being to ensure a complete education is delivered to the individual student with neurodiverse learning differences. Executive functioning, emotional regulation, and self-advocacy skill sets directly impact the student's ability to live independently and participate in today's modern economy and are critical to overall well-being (Clouder et al., 2020; Hu & Chandrasekhar, 2021). In the individual interview, Ashton noted that Alpha College recognizes that students with autism "are not one dimensional... they need support emotionally... with mental health, emotional health, social health, it's not just the academic piece." Similarly, in the individual interview, Ethan noted that Alpha College is "dedicated to whatever the individual needs ... wherever our students are is where we meet them." Noted by most participants during the individual interviews: Brittany, Carol, Diane, Ethan, Gino, Hank, Ivana, Jill, and Karl but said most clearly by Ashton, "I think what we do best, probably better than any institution in the country, is we serve our students holistically," Diane expressed during her individual interview that:

[Alpha College] excels at balance and finding that medium ... teaching those academic and life skills ... building that student up to be successful not only in college but after it ... that's where success is ... the student who's able to get through college but also be able to thrive after college, that's an important aspect in life ... life is about thriving ... enjoying oneself [while] learning and growing. [Student's] make that foundation here, and they have very successful lives after college.

Furthermore, during her individual interview, Brittany described the 5 key tasks Alpha College has identified as essential to developing cognitive and behavioral components of neurodiverse students, particularly those who are “on the spectrum” (Brittany). Brittany also described the “engagement model” that includes: “attendance, participation, homework completion, using supports and communication, [these tasks] create classroom experiences that are positive ... that build into life experiences that are positive... it’s holistic.” Hank added during his individual interview:

[Alpha College] supports the whole student best, ... most colleges look at students one-dimensionally through an academic performance lens and ... we recognize that holistic engagement, wellness, a strong community, academic and the need of the whole student is best.

Holistic education as a theme emerged from the individual interviews as the comprehensive strategies used to instruct, nurture, develop, and assist the entire individual student, where academic, social, physical, mental, and emotional well-being are all features working together to deliver a complete education for the individual student.

Complete Individualization

The first sub-theme of holistic education is complete individualization. Complete individualization is defined by the researcher as the extensive platform of services provided to the student based on the student’s individual needs. Professional Development documentation provided by the Career Services Office described how Alpha College recognizes that each student is an individual with unique facets, characteristics, deficits, and strengths that work together cohesively and at odds with one another (2022). These individual characteristics were revealed during the individual interview as the foundation for which Alpha College identifies areas of support and then supplements, develops, boosts, showcases, and nurtures with “well

thought out and deep consideration” (Ethan). Several focus group members noted that support planning begins and ends with the individual student’s needs. Ethan noted during his individual interview that “every need [the students] have, any kind, has been addressed and it’s all been so well thought out ... right down to their laundry... the transportation system or their life coach.” Similarly, Participant 1 and Participant 2 from the focus group noted how they work with the students “to understand where they're okay” and how to get them out “of their comfort zone... and then plan where [they] go to next?” Ashton added in his individual interview, that “from the moment the student gets to campus, we know who they are, we know their needs, we understand some of their challenges, we understand some of their strengths... then we get to know them better.”

The campuses’ unique support services essentially lead to individualized support. The following describes the learning specialists’ contributions to the individual student's emotional, social, and mental well-being. The individual interviews described the learning specialists, substantiated by the documentation on Alpha College’s Support Service webpage (2022). The individual interviews and focus group participants note that learning specialists act as “advisors” (Ashton; Hank), “companions” (Participant 1), “life coaches” (Ethan), “counselors” (Diane; Karl), “mentor” (Francis; Jill), “advocate” (Brittany; Carol), and “tutors” (Gino; Ivana). In her interview, Brittany noted that “learning specialists are really good at helping [their] students identify what really works for them and then implementing it.” During Gino’s individual interview, he added, “if I see any problems with accommodations or needs, I just give them whatever they need... within reason ... their learning specialists are the first point of contact to help me, help them.” Lastly, support services documentation from the Learning Support Center webpage described the main features of the learning specialists. Documentation from the Learning Support Center noted that learning specialists advocate, support, and hold the line

between individualized education and academic, emotional, mental, social, and wellness support (2022).

Complete Support Services

The second sub-theme of holistic education is complete support services. Complete support services are defined by the researcher as those support services that address all aspects of the student's emotional, physical, academic, social, and mental well-being. Documentation from the Transition Program showed that services include transition support into Alpha College, from the Transition Program (2022). The Transition Program is a student support service available to 11th grade high school students and incoming freshmen to Alpha College that helps to prepare and support the individualized academic, social, and emotional individual needs of the student. Transition Program documentation described how transition services could begin as early as "9 months before the student graduates from high school" (2022). Furthermore, academic support was described by several focus group members, several individual interviews, and documentation from the Learning Center. Academic supports included tutoring services described by Participants 1 and 4 from the focus group, the academic learning center as defined by documentation from the Learning Center's webpage (2022), the academic writing center as described by documentation from Alpha College's library webpage (2022), and individual learning specialists as described by documentation from the Student Support Services webpage (2022) and corroborated by Brittany, Francis, and Jill during their individual interviews. Academic accommodations that cater to the unique academic and social needs of the student in addition to "open testing" where students may take a quiz over the span of several hours and can break it up, answer two questions in the morning and another after lunch, and another in the afternoon" was described by Gino during his individual interview. Alpha College provides these services to deliver a complete and holistic education to each student by the student's individual

needs. Services encompass the entirety, or the holistic needs required to fully support, and nurture the academic, physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being of the individual student so that their skills promote independent living and a life where they “thrive” (Diane).

Each service provided by Alpha College speaks to an aspect of the student’s life that is needed to help them develop. In some cases, these skills need to be created, while others are simply areas of weakness. Alpha College works with the student to lift and hone existing assets and strengths, building confidence and independence. The academic supports provided at Alpha College are built on the foundation of the “classroom model” (Brittany), where students are not pulled out for resource support, but rather students remain in the classroom entirely, while the learning specialists work with the student to build engagement, value, and positive learning experiences. Documentation provided by the Student Support Services webpage described how the “classroom model” develops student engagement by first establishing current abilities and building upon those abilities to access more potential (2022). During Brittany’s individual interview, she described:

Student engagement is built... it's breaking the task down; can you attend class? No, let's break it down further. Can you set an alarm clock? Yes. So, this is the smallest task this student can perform, then you build it back to the larger one attending class... unless you actually experience success, nothing will happen. And so, we create those opportunities for success for our students, not participation trophies.

Brittany described the classroom model, “we create classroom engagement through experiences.” Additionally, in her interview, Brittany described pedagogy's role at Alpha College. Alpha College removes:

High-risk assignments instead of 5 assignments that makeup 20% of the grade, we give 25 assignments [so] students have the opportunity to show what they know... [lastly] we

believe class size matters for students that are neurodivergent [we put] 12 to 15 students in a class.

Emotional support, mental health, and social support for students were outlined on the Student Support Services webpage. Documentation from the Student Support Services webpage describes the social and emotional support are provided through resources like the OT, learning specialist, group therapy, social clubs, personal training, counselors, and therapists (2022). Social, emotional, and mental support and resources were further described during Karl's individual interview:

Learning specialists, an on-campus Occupational Therapist, life coaches, mental health counselors, and endless extra-curricular activities, clubs, events, trips, semesters abroad, life skills workshops, arts and crafts, poetry competitions, intramurals, and the student government, all of which promote not only social interaction, but develop social skills where deficits exist, and prevent students from self-isolation.

Diane's individual interview featured Alpha College's stance on complete student support by stating that "emotional support is just as important as learning specialist, and if [they are] struggling emotionally, that's going to take a toll on [their] academics and will impact their achievement."

During the focus group, Participant 2 noted that building skills to allow a student to live independently is a "step-by-step process" that begins before they come to campus during the transition period. Participant 4 added that self-advocacy and executive functioning are not:

One skill but a compilation of many skills working together. You can't just tell a student to self-advocate, and they know what that entails. In the [Transition Program], we teach them the steps to begin to self-advocate from the start is by the time they graduate; they can self-advocate.

During Ethan's individual interview, he described how personal trainers, and the athletics department helps support student well-ness through movement.

It's not about being talented at one single sport. It's about getting them out and being active... we had an adult bounce house come to campus, and they all had a blast and participated. "There are seemingly endless clubs, religious, art, political, end of the weekday events or activities, weekend trips to Disney, and campus activities. (Ethan) Additionally, complete support services for students include career development.

Documentation from the [Alpha]Fit webpage (2022) described how Alpha:

Daily physical activity isn't just good for the body; it helps sharpen the mind too. It is especially critical for college students to engage in some sort of activity to help maintain balance and wellbeing. [Alpha] provides free personal fitness and strength training to students, regardless of fitness level. Our trainers are certified ... [furthermore,] personal training can be a great way to get started for those who are too shy to work with a group. It can also be a way to focus steadily on personal fitness goals.

The documentation provided by the Career Development Department outlined how their department helps students draft and send resumes, CVs, and even cover letters. Karl's individual interview corroborated that his department helps students revise and edit resumes and employs student mentors to help build their work experience. During Gino's individual interview, he cited the importance of career development to him as an educator:

We do our best to bring in outside employers that specifically hire neurodiverse or people on the spectrum... so I do whatever the student needs to accommodate their learning. ... I mean, what's the point in teaching them all this stuff? If they don't use it and get hired, then I'm not doing my job.

Similarly, in the individual interview, Ashton described how alumni receive continued support from Alpha College through:

Job fairs, networking, and resume-building strategies... we begin the hiring process from the moment they begin school by providing volunteer opportunities, setting up career internships, organizing and promoting research internships, some from within our own majors, like zoology, we partner with local museums, labs, and research facilities to help build solid work experience.

All 11 participants from the individual interviews and all 4 participants from the focus group emphasized the importance of the learning specialists as a physical support service rather than an emotional, social, and mental well-being resource. Learning specialists are a critical feature within the support services programming at Alpha College. Brittany, the head of the learning specialist's department, noted during the individual interview that "learning specialists help students identify what works and ... supplement what doesn't." Brittany went on to describe how the learning specialists scaffold their students' development by assessing what is "missing [then] supplement through the... learning specialists", but that learning specialists are not the only feature to contribute to Alpha College's "classroom and engagement models," one must recognize the importance of "how [faculty] deliver instruction ... how engagement is supplemented... how [Alpha College] builds behavior management, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement."

Parent support was another critical feature contributing to student support services and their ultimate academic success. Parent support was described during multiple individual interviews and noted by several focus group members. Parental support is "paramount in delivering complete support" services at Alpha College (Participant 4). In Ashton's individual

interview, he described how Alpha College values the “parents’ voice.” Brittany’s individual interview expanded on this feature by explaining that Alpha College:

Understands that students [with] learning attention issues need scaffolding; they need some of these skills supplemented from the outside. You need to build those structures around them, and parents are that important structure. Certainly, to achieve any meaningful and sustainable outcome, you have to remove those structures, but you have to do it naturally. You just cannot say, here you are in the 12th grade, and your part of an IPE meeting, and now he is in the college his first semester, and he had to do it all alone ... it’s not realistic.

Participant 3 from the focus group added, “the parent, the services for the parents, through learning webinars ... is such an intentional design to include the parents, and that’s so important with students is having the intentional design of actually meeting with the parents.” Alpha College is “engaged in that sense of community and communicating to help both the student and the parents, to help us understand their students and we, in turn, help the parent understand their developmental stage, and what they need to succeed” added Ivana during her individual interview.

Faculty Support

The second theme that was identified was faculty support. Faculty support is defined by the researcher as the services and resources provided to faculty members to help them deliver a holistic education to every student according to the student’s individual learning needs.

According to the documentation provided by the creators and administrators of onboarding and professional development training from the Career Services Office and the Transition Program Department, faculty receive a semester-long onboarding training in routine hiring protocol and procedures such as retirement funds, benefits, typical departmental procedures, policies, and job

requirements. However, professional development training includes specialized training in Title Nine mandates. In an individual interview with Francis, an HR representative noted that not only is professional development continual, but it is also specialized to educate faculty and staff on various types of neurodiverse learning differences, such as “ASD, ADHD, ADD, Dyspraxia, and even Dyscalculia” otherwise known as a difficulty understanding numbers. Additionally, professional development documentation from the Career Services Department cited the history of ASD, symptoms, behavioral differences, best practices, and techniques for teaching social support, behavioral support, communication, and parental awareness to help support students specifically with ASD. See Appendix O for an example of professional development topics provided by the Career Services Department. Additional documentation provided by the provost’s office included professional development training schedules, course topics, and monthly workshops available to faculty and staff. Documentation of professional development provided by the provost outlined various topics covered during professional training, including improving the students’ emotional intelligence level, career development, and the transition into college (2022).

In addition to hosting supplemental workshops, Hank noted in his individual interview that Alpha College offers paid trips to academic conferences and invites outside or third-party guest speakers to speak on various topics such as neurodiverse employment, pedagogy, and emotional regulation. Hank added that these conferences and “training talks are not required” but supplemental. Jill corroborated in her individual interview that while she is swamped, “there are so many training sessions, I know I can always catch one when my semester opens; I never have to worry about missing out on additional training.” The leadership at Alpha College has a deep commitment to developing their faculty and the support staff. Support staff receives the same professional development training opportunities as faculty. During Diane’s individual interview,

she noted, “I am pursuing my Ph.D. in Neuropsychology... and [Alpha College] is paying for it.” The support staff at Alpha College is encouraged to attend professional conferences to draw inspiration from other institutions that may have a program that operates more efficiently than the existing program at Alpha College. During Karl’s individual interview, he noted that he enjoys attending conferences at larger universities “because larger universities have more funding and resources, I am able to see a more expansive example of possibilities for my department.”

Faculty support goes beyond professional development, degree-seeking, and the pursuit of understanding and knowledge about the population Alpha College serves. Gino’s individual interview cited how Alpha College offers support and resources for the emotional or personal side of education, where challenges and frustrations emerge from teaching students with neurodiverse learning differences. Gino described one of Alpha College’s faculty resources for emotional support, “Manic Mondays.”

Manic Mondays are group meetings where faculty members and support staff can congregate to share the different struggles they are facing, either personally or professionally; we offer each other advice and support on how to deal with certain student struggles. We honestly end up self-disclosing or sharing our own diagnosis because we are in a safe space. You come to find out that we are all a bunch of misfits, like the island of misfit toys from Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer, and I think that’s why we all love [Alpha College] so much. Here, everyone fits in. (Gino)

Professional Development

The first sub-theme of faculty support is professional development. The researcher defines professional development as both the mandated and voluntary training of the faculty and support staff to continually develop staff and faculty knowledge, understanding, and pedagogical

techniques on how to better deliver a holistic education to students with neurodiverse learning differences. As discussed above, professional development is implemented on a mandatory base by Alpha College to ensure the required accreditations are upheld and the continued endeavor to increase knowledge, understanding, problem-solving, and progress the mission to support neurodiverse learners holistically. Ivana discussed in her individual interview the “mandatory Title Nine training requirements that must be continued yearly to meet [Alpha College’s] accreditation to serve students with learning differences.” Ivana added that Alpha College implements staff and faculty training policies, such as their “milestone training each month,” to ensure that the college continues developing its mission's growth and progress. The professional development training provided by Alpha College has the benefit of personal insight; while academically and research-based, it is often created and developed by diverse thinkers, according to Ashton’s individual interview. “I will disclose that I am on the spectrum, I was diagnosed at 13 years old... and I offer a unique insight into how the mind of a person on the spectrum learners and thinks” (Ashton). In her interview, Diane added, “I was a student at [Alpha College]. I have ADHD... I feel like I offer a different understanding of how students like me learn... and that contributes to how and what we train our faculty and staff.” Ivana went on to describe additional staff resources and supports that are localized within her department:

As a [department]... facilitate our own Friday morning training where we would share for a whole academic year... I believe this makes us stronger; I learn so much from my director; she is a wealth of knowledge and experience; we both are really passionate about neuropsychology.

Professional development was described by four faculty participants, six support staff participants from the individual interviews, including all four participants from the focus group, and described in professional developmental documentation from the Career Center.

Documentation of Professional Development provided by the provost stated that “voluntary professional development training is provided to all faculty and staff on a bi-monthly basis” (2022). Additionally, several individual interviews showed that faculty and support staff are provided opportunities to attend academic conferences (Hank, Karl), act as keynote speakers (Brittany), independent support research (Ashton, Hank), and financially endorse the pursuit of higher academic degrees (Diane). Hank noted during his individual interview that “staff participates in a semester-long training series under the office of the provost, these center around a lot the things, you know; students with learning differences, everything from understanding, diagnostic profiles, interventions, social, emotional learning.” Hank went on to confirm that “we have ongoing professional development as part of our accreditation, and that really is always about how to work with this population and how to work better with each other as a team.” Professional development training at Alpha College seeks to provide the faculty and support staff with resource tools, services, and outlets to allow their employees the opportunity to continually grow and develop knowledge, understanding, and pedagogical techniques on how to better deliver a holistic education to students with neurodiverse learning differences.

Self- Reflection

The second sub-theme of faculty support is self-reflection. Self-reflection is defined by the researcher as the ability of the administration at Alpha College to humble self-interests and egoism so that areas of both weakness and opportunity may be identified and improved to ensure the delivery of a holistic education to students with neurodiverse learning differences. Self-reflection calls on the administration, faculty, and support staff to take personal responsibility for gaps and blind spots. The ability to identify areas of professional weakness gives the opportunity for the faculty and support staff at Alpha College to problem-solve as a team, together they can find better ways to deliver a holistic education for their neurodiverse student population. The

leadership at Alpha College has the unique ability to self-reflect, analyze blind spots, deny mediocrity, and stir progress. Ivana noted in her individual interview, “we are more focused on helping students learn more about themselves than ourselves in order to go out to find the people to find their tribe.” In her interview, Carol added, “when new things pop up, staff and teachers say, okay, let’s figure it out.” In his interview, Ethan also noted that “nothing within reason is off the table; they are intentional in this.” In his individual interview, Gino described how Alpha College is a community of “collaborative support that supports the faculty and the student circularly.” Lastly, Ashton added during his individual interview that “taking personal responsibility for the students is the standard at [Alpha College] ... it makes us the best at what we do and who we serve.”

All participants in the individual interviews, including all participants from the focus group, apart from one individual interview, noted that while Alpha College has extraordinary services, accommodations, support, and resources, there is always room for improvement. Of the 15 participants, 9 of the individual interview participants and 2 of the focus group participants cited the same resource, indicating that the faculty and staff are in tune with one another, but moreover they see expansion and growth as a critical need for Alpha College. During his interview, Ashton noted that Alpha College “has had a huge period of rapid growth leading to us needing more space.” Francis corroborated during her individual interview that “we have outgrown our space so fast, we need more office space.” Hank added in his individual interview, “we need more space for dorms,” while Gino found that Alpha College needs to create “more space for student congregation.” The participants from the individual interview and focus group shared observations that indicated the need for more space reflected their commitment to the growth and enrichment of their students. Additionally, these observations show the participants’ ability to self-reflect on Alpha College’s critical needs of the future. Self-reflection sub-theme

demonstrated the faculty and support staffs shared forward thinking. The participants did not concentrate on the here and now, personal gains, or self-interest. Rather when asked; why additional resources or supports would you like to see added to Alpha College, the majority of the participants responses were focused on needs that augment their ability to support and enfranchise the students at Alpha College.

Further, during her interview, Carol recommended that Alpha College needs “more classrooms.” Participants from the focus group added that the Transition Program offices need “more office space” to serve incoming freshmen better. In his interview, Karl stated that Alpha College needs more space and personnel. “We need more humans, and we need more space for those humans to accommodate our explosion and growth” (Karl).

Self-reflection was further discussed by Brittany during her individual interview in terms of personal accountability from the educator’s point of view. Self-reflection “is where we as educators must step back and push through our blind spots and say let me think about it and then move forward for whatever is best for the student.” Gino added to this perception of self-reflection in his individual interview that Alpha College is not about the “professors’ ego, it’s about collaborative support ... we do whatever it takes, throw out everything you think you know about teaching neurodiverse students, and just do whatever it takes.” Gino added that he was brought into his position because the original instructor was burned out. The provost asked him:

Why is this woman so burnt out, and I responded, because you’re killing her, she’s overworked, she needs help, she’s only one person. They hired me, and I took over the department when she left; we have two instructors per class. They bring in learning specialists, the OT, counselors, IT, and anything we need when we as instructors have an issue helping our students, they do whatever it takes, within bounds of course. (Gino)

Hank described his perception of self-reflection during his individual interview from the stance of social improvements.

I would like us to be able to increase our social skills curriculum, so really diving into research around how can we teach social norms and conventions to neurodiverse people ages 17 or even 16 to 24 ... I would like to create a mentorship program with our staff and with our students, where students and staff can learn about the field and become experts in that. I will say at [Alpha College], what's really unique is that if we feel like there's a demonstrated need to improve the student experience, whether that's before, during, or after college under our president, that will happen (Hank)

Self-reflection is a valuable tool to foster personal and professional development. Alpha College understands that the status quo and mediocrity does not open doors to progress and achievement. This is evident in the culture of the faculty and support staff, where there is a resounding willingness and excitement for the future. The leadership at Alpha College has the unique ability to humble self-interests and egoism so that areas of both weakness and opportunity may be identified and improved to ensure the delivery of a holistic education to students with neurodiverse learning differences. Ashton reflected this excitement in his individual interview, where he noted that Alpha College is looking to “add two more degrees; all we need now is the space; it’s the only thing holding us back.” While Hank described his excitement to “come out to the world” and share how Alpha College is “enriching the lives and future of neurodiverse students... the time is now!”

Outlier Findings

The outlier findings from this study were *no added resources* and *love*.

I define the first outlier, *no added resources*, as the idea that the faculty do not need additional resources to help deliver a holistic education to the individual student with

neurodiverse learning differences. This finding was present in only one unexpected data point. This finding emerged during an individual interview and immediately stood out during data collection. I asked the participant, “what supports, resources, and services would you like to see added to Alpha College’s services?” Ethan noted that he would not like to see any more services added to Alpha College. Ethan stated, “none... I don’t want to see any more added” to Alpha College, as it may cause “me to overthink a situation” rather than using my current tools. At the same time, Ethan’s response at first brought confusion, as I fully expected him to offer a suggestion. I quickly understood that Ethan was not implying that Alpha College should remain stagnant or that progress is unimportant. Ethan believes instead that Alpha College has “thought of everything,” he added, “it’s so well thought out ... anything you could think of, they have something for it.” Ethan found that Alpha College has created every possible support, resource, and solution to help the students succeed, and the faculty provides a holistic education to students with neurodiverse learning differences.

The second outlier, *love*, is defined as a source of emotional regulation used by the faculty member to deliver a holistic education to individual students with neurodiverse learning differences. Ethan was the only participant that stressed the importance of *love* as a teaching strategy. Ethan stated that he “tries to enter each situation with a student with genuine caring and support and love” he doesn’t want to interfere with his “way of approaching my students, as I am always coming from a place of love, too many services make it more complicated. ... I just need to calm them and listen and that comes from love” (Ethan). While Gino noted in his individual interview his profound “love for his students” and “the people [he] works with,” Ethan was the only participant to draw his pedagogical method, skills, and strategies from love. “I am a believer... love is the universal language... I come from a place of love; when handling any situation with my Autistic students ... they can sense that I genuinely care. That’s how I teach.”

Love is a tool used to help a faculty member develop emotional regulation and as a pedagogical strategy to deliver a holistic education to individual students with neurodiverse learning differences.

Research Question Responses

Graduation rates for autistic students are lower than neurotypical college students (Clouder et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2018). This research highlights the significance in understanding how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates such high graduation rates for its autistic student population. Understanding how programs, activities, and resources at Alpha College support autistic students effectively demonstrates how neurodiversity as an educational theory generates positive actions (Anderson et al., 2019; Cage et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2020; Cox et al., 2021; Tipton & Blacher, 2014; Viezel et al., 2020).

Central Research Question

How does Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generate uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population? The holistic education theme and faculty support theme demonstrate how Alpha College generates high graduation rates for its autistic student population. The holistic education approach, combined themes, complete individualization, and complete support services echo the key features in the current literature where positive perception, understanding, instruction, involvement, and enfranchisement are foundational to neurodiverse success in higher education (Bakker et al., 2019). Furthermore, students receive support through more avenues than just tutoring and “pull-out services that only act to tell the student the same thing twice” (Brittany). Academic activities and programs are “supported and developed through social and emotional activities, clubs, programs, and organizations” (Carol). “Students are for all intents and purposes

saturated with support” (Ashton).

The sub-themes that underpin faculty support are professional development and self-reflection and guide the faculty and support staff to deliver a holistic education to students with neurodiverse learning differences. Alpha College’s existing faculty support services, training, resources, and outlets aid the faculty and staff to “scaffold the students learning experience and personal development” more effectively than the “convention methods seen in every other student Learning Center and [Student Life] program” (Brittany). Alpha College's faculty and staff fulfill required training hours and actively pursue personal and professional growth through continued professional development training enriched by knowledge, research, and first-hand experiences and aligned with self-reflection based on personal accountability and humility. Building knowledge about ASD and other neurodiverse disabilities within the faculty and staff culture fosters academic achievement for students with ASD and neurodiverse learning differences (Kim, 2021). “I'm lucky enough, in my new position, where [Alpha College] supports me, so I'm able to go to professional conferences so that I can continue to learn more and help our students” (Ivana).

Sub-Question One

What support programs exist at Alpha College to support graduation rates for its autistic student population? Complete support services, a sub-theme of holistic education, is an extensive list of academic and social support programs available to students at Alpha College. Still, it also described how support services extend past the generic. Participant 2 from the focus group noted that Alpha College’s support services surpass conventional secondary education models, to provide complete support to enfranchise or “built-up” the student’s “social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being.” Furthermore, Alpha College uses a grass-roots approach to creating its academic model to support its students’ academic success achievement. Academic achievement

is defined here as reaching the bench march of graduation and the ability to live independently and participate in a modern economy (Kim, 2021). Alpha College's academic model is founded on research-based developmental psychology. "We use the five pillars for success, a model [Alpha College] developed through our own research. We use Bloom's higher order thinking model: remembering, understanding, applying analysis which includes synthesis and evaluation, and finally creation or application" (Brittany). Academics are also supported by principles seen in occupational therapy where the OT helps to "improve emotional regulation for students with ASD" (Carol). Carol described in her individual interview that an "occupational therapists will come into the classroom to help support the learning specialists, to either build engagement in the classroom or help navigate emotional regulation." Furthermore, Brittany added that while Alpha College provides tutoring services, they go beyond conventional tutoring. "We build learning and engagement skills around the student's current ability to allow them to engage and access the value of the tutoring service; without the foundational skills, tutoring services will have no value" (Brittany).

Ivana addressed additional features of Alpha College support programs, each "individual department [has] an active reading group that has taken place through our Center for Student success with the learning specialists." Ashton added during his individual interview, "we have incredible counseling center specialists that provide academic and emotional support services. We have individual therapy available that 83% of our student's access and utilize." Hank described how the Transitional Programs also help to support academic achievement in the long run. The Transition Program assuages the "transition process from a controlled high school atmosphere" to the influx of "independence" in becoming a freshman. Documentation from the Transition Program webpage (2022) corroborated Participant 4's statement from the focus group statements that "students either bound for [Alpha College] or another university may access the

Transition program; these services are available from as early as the student's 11th grade or junior year of high school." Participant 1 from the focus group further described the role of the Transition Program as responsible for helping new students "prepare for a new environment." Participant 2 added that "we try to front-load emotional regulation skills in preparation for college as much as we can. It is important for many students, but especially our students with autism, ... to be able to predict what's coming and anticipate as many issues as we can so that we can have solutions already kind of like built-in." Participant 4 noted that "we do a lot of problem-solving, especially toward the end of their senior year to prepare our students for their new specific environment." Participant 3 from the focus group described how these supports help students achieve academic success. Still, it is essential to add that the parent is critical to student success.

Sub-Question Two

What activities exist at Alpha College to support graduation rates for its autistic student population? Complete individualization and complete support service sub-themes produce an array of activities available to students at Alpha College to support, develop, and nurture each student's academic and personal growth. Social and academic activities provided and endorsed by Alpha College enrich the student's journey not just to reach degree completion but to prepare for the complete transition into "adulthood and independent living" (Ashton). Francis described the plethora of activities she witnessed simply as a support staff member in her individual interview. "We have massive amounts [of activities], on weekends, on weekdays, trips to Disney, outings, clubs, we have so many supports, it's so many I can hardly read all the emails, [students] are never at a loss of things to do both on and off campus" (Francis). Ivana noted that activities are student based in her individual interview, "we have a lot of different activities that

are student-driven, we take many of the cues from them.” During Ethan’s individual interview, he substantiated the importance of the student’s voice:

We never have to worry if an activity is going well, especially with my students on the spectrum, they will tell you if it’s a success or total failure, they will also tell you how to make it better, and you know what, they are usually right.

“We have events every night after class... hosted by housing and other departments, but they have been training mindfulness activities and workshops to help foster skills for independent living” (Gino). Ashton reiterated during his individual interview that:

During the week, we always have an activity or event after classes are over; we also have many events and activities on the weekends, trips, hiking, and museums. We offer these activities to help students build life skills but social skills, and friendships too. These activities all help to keep them engaged, and out of their dorm room, so they don’t self-isolate.

Ethan described many of the activities provided by Alpha College in his individual interview, “we do all sorts of activities; different game nights ... they go to Disney World, rock climbing, hiking, ... recreation trips, ... paddle boarding, ... adult bouncy houses, wizardry, art, you name it.” Different departments host activities at Alpha College and often have seasonal themes to help create more value and incentivize engagement. Karl described some of the activities his department hosted during the Halloween season for students during his individual interview.

We hold a poetry competition each semester, we did a horror-themed poetry and ‘shorts’ contest for Halloween, and we give away grand prizes, you know, an Amazon gift card and the winner got to move on to a larger contest, where the winner becomes the featured poet of the year. It’s remarkable because you take these quiet kids who have not said a peep all year, and by their second line, they are belting out these emotions, and they get

all this applause and support from their peers; it helps build real community support.

(Karl)

Activities sponsored, endorsed, and hosted by Alpha College staff and faculty demonstrate their investment in the student's holistic education. Engagement is more than just attendance at an event. Activities provide an opportunity to build social and relationship skills that matriculate into all aspects of the student life and consequent ability to participate fully (Kim, 2021). Ashton described how when Alpha College hosts an activity or event, the staff and administration take a mental account of student engagement.

It's not enough for a student to come to an event to get a slice of pizza and then return to their dorm room; that's not engagement. ... We, as a staff, look to see if the student interacts with their peers; if not, we take note of these things and try to problem-solve better ways to help facilitate that social engagement. We are also looking for ways to make things better. (Ashton)

Support staff and faculty that sponsor activities observe if and how students interact with their peers during planned social experiences. Alpha College can collect real-time best practices. Social observations, in tandem with the self-reflection sub-theme, demonstrate Alpha College's ability to self-assess and actuate problem-solving to help enrich and improve a student's social-emotional level. Moreover, practicing social observations and self-reflection during activities reflects Alpha College's deep commitment to delivering complete support services and complete individualization of education for students with neurodiverse learning differences.

Sub-Question Three

What perceptions about autism exist at Alpha College to support graduation rates for its autistic student population?

A positive perception of students with autism is present at Alpha College. Positive perceptions are reflected in the complete individualization approaches used to deliver a holistic education at Alpha College. The complete individualization approach is how Alpha College, as an educational body, carries out its positive perceptions. The complete individualization approach is an extensive platform of services based on the student's individual learning needs. Positive perceptions can also be seen throughout the faculty and support staff atmosphere at Alpha College. These perceptions are mirrored in the faculty and support staff's ability to access acceptance and patience with their students. Positive perceptions were found in the responses from every individual interview and every focus group participant in this study. Sincere sentiments are the byproduct of positive perception and attitude. Ethan genuinely cares for his students, "if you can just be patient ... give them time ... slow down and listen, they will respond. ... Even if we struggle with understanding, love is a universal language, and they understand." Similarly, Karl's perception of his students reflected an optimistic, positive, and genuine caring during his individual interview:

I tend to take more of a humanistic approach... I don't care what their label is; I prefer not to know to be honest, because, at the end of the day, they are a person ... I am very real with my students; they can see right through fake people have been fake to their faces their whole lives, so I am just real with them.

Ivana described one of her favorite students with whom she felt a genuine and authentic understanding. My autistic student "worked so hard to keep it together and struggled emotionally and sensory regulation-wise, even though he was brilliant in so many ways, [he was] my favorite student" (Ivana). Ivana went on to describe her perception of students on the spectrum as having "so many gifts... I like [their] honesty and a kind of emotional depth that [they] display openly... I just connect" with them. Participant 1 from the focus group recounted the attributes they see in

their autistic students with genuine admiration, “my students with autism tend to be the ones that follow through the best; if you give them some expectations, they will follow them step by step.”

Another feature of social perception seen at Alpha College is relatability. Gino described his relatability with his students:

I am autistic, too, so to me, it makes sense. I see my students as having a different way of communicating than I do. They want to learn so badly; that’s why I am here, and to be honest, I’d rather communicate nonverbally. I get very drained after several hours of communicating and being “on.” My wife knows I need to go home by Friday, and then by Sunday, I am back to myself. So, I understand a lot of what my students go through.

Similarly, Ashton disclosed his experience with autism:

Although I am autistic, I didn’t realize that other autistic people were different from me, and meeting other autistic people opened my eyes to the diversity of the spectrum.

Because of this experience, I feel like I can relate to my students better because I understand that we all have different ways of thinking.

Ethan further described his relatability with his students, where he understands the feelings of a young boy, and he also recognizes the beauty in his student’s truth. Ethan spoke of spending time with his young male students in the cafeteria. He saw how they react to a female student that shows a romantic interest in them.

I love that they can’t and don’t hide their inner emotions, they are not confined by the restraints of our society, and they feel what they feel... it must be nice to be free from the social box that you and I live in... they can just be true to their feelings. (Ethan)

Throughout the study, the participant’s positive perceptions were also reflected in the complete support services and efforts to enfranchise, build up, and nurture their students’ individual

development. The presence of a positive perception towards students with autism at Alpha College provides the climate for students to achieve both academically and personally.

Summary

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. Chapter Four described the participants recurring themes, and sub-themes resulting from three data collection methods: individual interviews, a focus group, and document analysis. Document analysis used documentation that covered hiring protocol, professional development schedules, training, and student support resource services to corroborate themes found in the individual interviews and the focus group. Triangulation of the data were conducted using multiple levels of triangulation through audio-recordings, analytical memos, data collection, and reflexivity to ensure confirmability of the study. Reflexivity refers to the intentional mindfulness exercised by the researcher to attend to their personal perspective during each phase of the research process (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Furthermore, transcripts and field notes taken during the individual interviews were cross-analyzed with the transcripts and field notes taken during the focus group interview. As the human instrument, I used analytical memoing to synthesize digital websites and documents and audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes for the individual interviews to achieve triangulation (Saldaña, 2021; Yin, 2018).

Results revealed two key themes: holistic education and faculty support. Additionally, 4 sub-themes emerged from the data; complete individualization, and complete support services fell under the holistic education theme, while professional development and self-reflection fell under the faculty support theme. These themes were defined by the main areas Alpha College

provides support for its “community of learners” (Ashton), the student, the faculty, and the support staff.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. Chapter Five presents a discussion and interpretation of the findings that draw implications on how theory leads to practice. Furthermore, key findings from Alpha College were presented. Limitations and delimitations of the research are delineated, and further recommendations for future research are included. Chapter Five ends with a conclusion for this research study.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss theoretical findings and findings from Alpha College that were rooted in the data's central themes, holistic education, and faculty support. There were four sub-themes that emerged from the two central themes; from holistic education came sub-themes of complete individualization and complete student support services. From the faculty support central theme came the two sub-themes of professional development and self-reflection. The central themes were rooted in the theoretical contexts, Blume's (1998) and Singer's (1999) neurodiversity theory and Goffman's (1963) social stigma theory that guided this study. There are two direct implications from the themes and sub-theme: perception and action that are described in this section. Lastly, I will discuss the Alpha College findings: model, pedagogy, faculty, supports, and effects on students that demonstrate how Alpha College generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population.

Interpretation of Findings

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely

high graduation rates for its autistic student population. The two main thematic findings that emerged from this study are perception and action. These findings were informed by this study's driving theories, social stigma theory and neurodiversity theory. Social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) and neurodiversity theory (Blume, 1998; Singer, 1999) were seen within Alpha College's atmosphere, infrastructure, pedagogical techniques, support programs, and services. Social stigma theory identifies how human perception of another creates and defines the individual's social identity (Goffman, 1963). Identity fosters an associated value, respect, stigma, and bias against those that do not conform to neurotypical identities (Goffman, 1963). At Alpha College perception is informed by an established atmosphere of acceptance of the "other". Alpha College only admits students with learning differences, therefore when an autistic individual comes to Alpha College, either in-person or virtually they are stepping into a community specifically designed for the atypical. There is no social stigma because the assumption of value is the driving mission. Value of the atypical or the "other" is the purpose of Alpha College. Positive perception of the atypical or "other" is the very backbone of Alpha College's programming because they see the future of the "other" as an investment worth their time, money, and tireless effort.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Neurodiversity is the reflection of multiple and varying characteristics from within an individual that demonstrates their neurological state of learning (Blume, 1998; Singer, 1999). At Alpha College the enfranchisement of neurodiverse learners is the mission. Alpha College is the physical embodiment of neurodiverse theory because it is the act of teaching, developing, and enriching the neurodiverse learner. Alpha College specializes in action and exclusively seeks neurodiversity.

A summation of perception and action are included in the following section. Furthermore, this section will discuss how perception and action tie into the guiding research theories, social stigma and neurodiversity theories. The findings discussed in this section were informed by the research questions guiding this study and further substantiated by the key themes; holistic education and faculty support that emerged from the data.

Perception

Perception is either the engineer of social acceptance or the contractor of stigmatization to the “other” (Goffman, 1963). Therefore, perception informs behavior, where positive perception generates positive behavior and action, while negative perception generates negative behavior, action, or inaction. Perception must first be addressed as it is integral in informing residual actions (Goffman, 1963). At Alpha College there is a presence of positive perception towards the autistic and neurodiverse student population. The actions that have borne the plethora of support programs, services, and activities at Alpha College would cease to exist, or remain fruitful if a positive perception were not the foundation of the school’s mission.

Neurodiversity theory says that not all differences are perceived as deficits and that differences do not remove value (Blume, 1998; Singer, 1999). Neurodiversity theory validates atypical differences by stating that they have the capacity and ability to contribute to the world socially, culturally, and academically (Blume, 1998; Singer, 1999). Negative perceptions about autistic and neurodiverse students were not detected during any of the participant interviews but, rather, were also substantiated by the positive behaviors or actions that faculty, staff, and administration are engaging in at Alpha College. Conversely, there was evidence of positive perception and attitude towards individuals with autism and neurodiverse learning abilities detected in both verbal and nonverbal expression and body language during every participant interview during the study. Every participant spoke about autistic students with affection,

admiration, and endearment. The existing perceptions at Alpha College not only fuel current actions, but drive the college to constantly seek, to do, to give, to learn, and to provide more for their autistic and neurodiverse students.

Action

Action is the delivery system of perception (Goffman, 1963). Positive perception actively informs Alpha College's administration, support staff, and faculty's desire, drive, and ability to deliver a holistic education to the "whole student" (Ashton, Brittany, Carol, Diane, Ethan, Francis, Gino, Hank, Ivana, Jill, Karl, Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4). The literature substantiates that autistic college students value and benefit from specialized support (Cage & Howes, 2020; Ford, 2012; Scheef et al., 2019; Viesel et al., 2020). Complete support services at Alpha College are the action that provides extensive activities to students to build academic, social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being. Exceptionally, at Alpha College, action also supports the professional well-being and development of the faculty. Action rooted in positive perception brings the guiding research theories, social stigma theory and neurodiversity theory, to life. The main findings that outline what Alpha College does to generate uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population are the byproduct of perception driving action.

Alpha College Findings

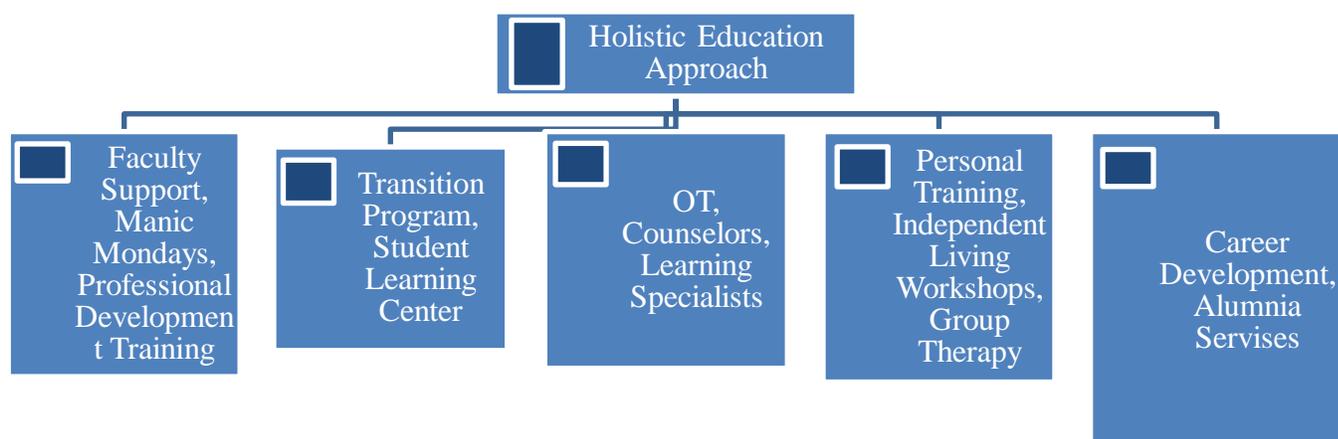
The following section outlines the main findings from how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. The main findings show that Alpha Colleges' model, pedagogy, faculty, and supports contribute to more than academic success, but the development of the whole student. At Alpha College students receive a holistic education that prepares them for a lifetime of independence, social relationships, economic freedom, and a

lifetime of learning. The model, pedagogy, faculty, and supports at Alpha College produce high graduation rates for the autistic student population. More fully, autistic students at Alpha College receive an education that nurtures full development and transition into adulthood where independent living, economic autonomy, emotional, and social well-being are the true markers of a holistic education.

Model

Alpha College generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population through a holistic education approach. The effects of holistic education and deep reaching faculty supports on the autistic and neurodiverse student population were mostly indicated by Alpha Colleges higher-than-average student retention rates at 73% over the nation average of 69% and four-year graduation rates at 52% for first-time, full-time while the national four-year graduation average for first-time, full-time is 35.8% ([Alpha] College Factual, 2022). The holistic education approach provides completely individualized programming, accommodations, resources, and supports for the autistic students at Alpha College. Figure 2 illustrates how programing and activities at Alpha College feed into holistic learning to develop the whole student. Alpha College's holistic learning reaches beyond conventional academic achievement, high graduation rates, and rock-solid GPA's and develops executive functioning, emotional and physical well-being, independence, social relationships, emotional regulation skills, sensory coping strategies, and social and academic communication.

Figure 2 Components of Holistic Learning



Pedagogy

Alpha College generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population through the pedagogy delivered to the individual students. The pedagogy includes holistic education approach, that provides completely individualized programming where accommodations, resources, and student supports cater to the student. Moreover, the pedagogy seeks to develop a holistic learning experience based in best practices from the individual in their current developmental state but also with their future in mind by setting small achievable goals, that build positive behavior momentum. Positive behavioral momentum is used as commonly used in ABA therapy and behavioral and developmental psychology because it builds momentum towards achieving larger goals, by first presenting smaller more attainable goals (Rekers & Lovaas, 1974; Sandoval-Norton et al., 2021). Not only does the success of achieving a smaller goal build confidence towards reaching the larger goal, but it also develops the skills needed to achieve the larger goal. For example, at Alpha College a student that presents with difficulty attending class, will begin with the smaller goal of setting an alarm for the allotted time needed to ready themselves and make it to class on time. Rather than typical pedagogy fueled by general education's best practices, pedagogy at Alpha College begins with the need's common to individuals with learning difference such as ASD, AS, ADD, ADHD, and Dyslexia and then

individualized support, accommodations, and instruction. Common symptoms of autism are delays or deficits in expressive and receptive communication, tactile and audio- sensory sensitivities, and challenges fostering social relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Nah & Tan, 2021; Saade et al., 2020). For example, audio-sensory symptoms common to ASD are found to impact how autistic students attend, engage, and learn in conventional settings. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Nah & Tan, 2021; Saade et al., 2020). Faculty at Alpha College understand that audio-sensory sensitivities impact engagement and therefore how the faculty delivers instruction. For example, students that present with audio-sensory sensitivity are able to use headphones or adaptive communication devices during instruction, but they additionally receive support from their learning specialist, the OT, and the faculty member to glean management techniques and coping skills so that their audio-sensory sensitivities may improve. This example demonstrates Alpha Colleges' pedagogical techniques through holistic education approach and complete individualization. The holistic education aspect is addressed by Alpha College, providing support from the OT and learning specialists to address a symptom that impacts multiple areas of the student's life, not just academics. Furthermore, the complete individualization is demonstrated in that not all autistic individuals demonstrate this symptom. Alpha College is meeting the student where they are currently and building positive behaviors step by step towards the larger academic and social goals. Individualization determines how and what is the best practice and course of action for each student at Alpha College.

The holistic education approach means that pedagogy must also develop deficits on a social and emotional level because holistic education is the instruction, nurturing, growth, and assistance of the entire students' academic, social, physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The holistic education approach delivers individualized instruction so that goals can be put in place to reduce deficits. Alpha College recognizes that learning is social and emotional.

Executive functions, relationship skills, sensory coping, and emotional regulation skills impact the whole student, not just one area of their lives; these skills are interlocking. Individualization of holistic learning means the individualization of goals. The pedagogy at Alpha College supports the individual student's development, where non-academic skills that ultimately impugnon academic achievement for autistic students are addressed. Alpha College developed a pedagogy that is delivered in part by the learning specialists who play a key role in providing academic, social, and emotional support for the student.

Faculty

Alpha College generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population by supporting its faculty professionally and personally. Infrastructural improvements and problem-solving are mere byproducts of a high level of humility and grace within the leadership culture at Alpha College. Moreover, the administration and leadership at Alpha College have established a culture drenched in acceptance and humility. A significant anomaly that exists at Alpha College is that the faculty and support staff are motivated, energized, and deeply passionate about their work. The faculty and staff are forward facing and recognize blind spots, gaps, and weaknesses. Instead of falling back on bureaucratic complacency and excuses for why they cannot deliver the support and resources students need at Alpha College, the faculty and staff turn to problem-solving, teamwork, and self-reflection to find solutions. There is an inherent indifference towards complacency at Alpha College; it is simply not a consideration. Instead, there is a cultural detachment from the conventional, that allows ideas and creativity to flow. At Alpha College the leadership cultural encourages infrastructural refurbishment, growth, and expansion to take the lead, not excuses. The leadership culture says, "Our students come first" and trickles down to the faculty and support staff resulting in a student-centered culture throughout Alpha College.

Culture is defined as “the way of life of a particular people, especially as shown in their ordinary behavior and habits, their attitudes toward each other, and their moral and religious beliefs” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Part of the student-centered culture at Alpha College seems to stem from the value of self-reflection. Self-reflection was observed in the faculty’s willingness to set aside egoism and seek support and resources for gaps in their own teaching techniques. At Alpha College, faculty and support staff demonstrate self-reflection by looking at a current challenge or need and finding a path forward. An example of self-reflection is shown when a faculty member noted that they had an autistic student who was also a second-language learner. The student needed help understanding the content being delivered by an instructional database. The faculty member merely mentioned the challenge at a Manic Monday meeting, and another faculty member jumped at the opportunity to assist both the faculty member and the student. The staff member offered to come to the classroom during their own time to work one-on-one with the student as well as teach the faculty member how to better utilize the database Spanish setting more effectively. At Alpha College, the future is today’s blueprint.

Faculty support resources at Alpha College help generate high graduation rates for its autistic student population. Professional development is the result of effective programming, policy, resources, and supports implemented by administrative leadership that deeply cares about Alpha Colleges’ mission to serve and enfranchise students with autism and neurodiverse learning differences. The faculty at Alpha College demonstrate their dedication through the implementation of the continued and ever evolving training, support, and enrichment of their faculty and support staff. Professional development at Alpha College reflects the mission statement in action, to serve and enfranchise neurodiverse learners. To effectively serve autistic and neurodiverse learners, the faculty and support staff must understand autism and neurodiverse learning differences. The faculty and support staff at Alpha College continually receive training

in the most up to date neurodiverse and autism research and actively contribute to neurodiverse research through research opportunities. This current study is an example of such contributions; however, there are faculty and support staff members who were noted by their peers to be leaders in autism research and featured in multiple keynote speeches at autism research conferences. The benefits of having faculty and support staff in the fray means the students receive resources and supports gleaned from research-based techniques and perspectives.

Supports

Alpha College generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population through an extensive platform of services and supports. What distinctively stands out about the resources and supports available to students at Alpha College is the considerable and well-thought-out nature of each resource and the area of development and support for which it scaffolds. Each resource and support service were adapted or created to address a critical aspect or gap of the student's life either, academically, socially, or developmentally, all of which are mechanisms to enfranchise or invest the student, their holistic development, and lifelong success. On and off-campus activities at Alpha College are the forefront of neurodiverse higher education because the activities are more than a good party, they serve as opportunities to educate autistic and neurodiverse students holistically. A hiking trip at Alpha College is an opportunity to enrich social connections, teach emotional regulation, ease social anxiety, build self-confidence, and hone communication skills all while observing the ecosystem and its wonder at play. The students at Alpha College quite literally have the opportunity to play their way through personal development, independence, and self-actualization.

The faculty and support staff receive a similar depth of support as the students. Faculty and support staff are provided supports that are research based. Some of these supports include continued professional development, emotional, and pedagogical support through the Learning

Specialists, Occupational Therapist, and Manic Monday's. The faculty and support staff are supported by the leadership at Alpha College through personal and professional autonomy and ownership from within the college's infrastructure. Faculty are provided a voice that is truly heard. Faculty have the ability to affect enrichment and change at Alpha College. Faculty members that have an idea, goal, or plan to help service or fill gaps for the student, progression of research, or the betterment of the professional working environment are given a genuine audience and genuine consideration. At Alpha College the students and faculty are supported with thoughtful sincerity. Figure 3 outlines the most significant student support services at Alpha College, while Figure 4 outlines the most significant faculty support resources at Alpha College.

Figure 3 Components of Effective Supports for Students at Alpha College 



Transition
Program

Figure 4 Components of Effective Supports for Faculty and Support Staff at Alpha College

Summary of Thematic Findings

Thematic findings were reviewed, in tandem with the audio-recording, transcripts, field notes were taken during the individual interviews and the focus group interview along with the analytical memoing of the documents. The two thematic findings: perception, and action were informed by the central and sub- research questions. Perception informs behaviors, while behaviors or actions are the delivery system of perception (Goffman, 1963). The relationship between perception and action impact autism because they reveal how autistic college students are perceived and how they are supported in the higher education setting. Positive perception of autism and the “other” equate to actions that enrich and enfranchise more effective academic and social supports and resources. Perception without action is a sentimental platitude, they fall nicely on the ear and fill the soul with hope, but in the end, are empty. Perception without action does not progress, enrich, or enfranchise. Similarly, action without perception is a ship lost at sea; it has no direction, purpose, focus, or intent. Actions based on no perception at all, reveal indifference to the success or failure of the “other” (Goffman, 1963). Like paint splattered on a wall, a few actions formed in indifference may by chance enfranchise a few but hardly represent the rich, thick, conscious, and intentional progression, enrichment, and enfranchisement of the “other” (Goffman, 1963). Worse still are actions based on negative perceptions. It stands to reason under social stigma theory that if positive perception informs positive behavior the equal and opposite effect must be true; negative perception informs negative behavior (Goffman, 1963). Negative perception breeds negative intent, while negative intent undermines progress, enrichment, and enfranchisement of the “other”. Perception and action are both represented at Alpha College because Alpha College progresses, enriches, and enfranchises the “other” (Goffman, 1963).

Implications for Policy or Practice

The implications gleaned from this study pertain to policy and practice. The impact on policy pertains to federal policies that may better meet the needs of the growing autistic student population in higher education. The implications for practice pertaining to infrastructural design of university support programs and resources and pedagogical techniques rooted in the study of neurodivergent learning. These implications propose a transformative shift in perception and action, where one affects change in the other and results in more effective support practices and actions for the growing ASD population. Thoughtfully designed policies, programming, training, and support services founded in principles of behavioral psychology create positive social experiences enhance academic skills, and individualized learning. Autistic and neurodiverse students have greater success and higher graduation rates when learning and social support is built into the college's infrastructure, courses, programs, activities, and faculty training.

Implications for Policy

The implications for policy regarding the findings of this study reside in federal guidelines that lack sufficient support for students with autism and other neurodivergent learning differences in higher education. Legislation like IDEA, LRE, and inclusion lead to educators changing not only actions but perceptions about the value, capabilities, and best practices for educating students in special education programs (Bolourian et al., 2018a; 2020 Crockett & Kauffman, 1997; Idol, 2006; Nicolaidis et al., 2019). However, IDEA, LRE, and even 504 have no bearing on assuring that previously standing IEPs are upheld in college (Bolourian et al., 2018a; IDEA, 2004). Title IX of the Education Amendment of 1972 ensures that higher education institutions may not discriminate against individuals (The United States Department of Justice, 2022). In comparison, Section 504 (IDEA, 2004) and ADA (1990) do ensure that postsecondary institutions provide access to resources and accommodations for students with

disabilities (Cage & Howes, 2017; Collins & Mowbray, 2008; Kim & Crowley, 2021). These accommodations often include extended deadlines on assignments, extra test-taking time, pre-printed lecture notes, or an assigned note-taker (Cage et al., 2020; Cage & Howes, 2020; Jansen et al., 2018), alternate exams, and assignment formatting (Lombardi & Lalor, 2017). Therefore, as the growing population of autistic and neurodiverse learners enter higher education, there is little to ensure they will be provided the support and resources they need holistically to succeed.

Alpha College takes a highly specialized approach to attend to each student's learning, social, and wellness. Comprehensive federal policy should similarly protect neurodiverse student's right to continued academic accommodations and support into higher education. Moreover, these policies should be centered in neurodivergent knowledge founded in proven pedagogical techniques and supported by developmental and behavioral psychology. These policies would ensure that autistic and neurodiverse students, who have just as much right to be protected, as those covered in Title IX, receive research-based instruction, resources, and supports that meet the needs of their neurodivergent abilities.

Implications for Practice

The implication for practice regarding the findings of this study reside in the infrastructural design of university support programs and resources and pedagogical techniques rooted in the study of neurodivergent learning. Alpha College uses a classroom model to support student learning, positive social experiences, and emotional regulation from within the classroom, rather than through pull-out services. Pull-out services typically offer repeated instruction where the student receives the same material twice. The faculty and learning specialists at Alpha College build meaningful learning, positive engagement, and value in the material from within the classroom. The faculty utilize support staff when they need support promoting emotional regulation, executive functioning, and positive social engagement. The

infrastructural design at Alpha College supports neurodivergent students. The accessibility of instruction for students is considered best practices at Alpha College. Students that demonstrate a lag or weak points in academic, social, executive functioning, and emotional regulation skills are further supplemented by the Learning Support Center. However, it is the faculty who lead in providing support and services to the student. The faculty supplement student engagement.

Alpha College utilizes the engagement model that outlines the standard for behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Brittany). The faculty at Alpha College understand how to meet the students' academic, social, and wellness needs, they work directly with learning specialists to nurture the engagement and behavioral components of learning. There are 5 tasks that Alpha College learning specialists have identified as critical for academic success. Students must be able to attend class, to participate in class, to do work outside of the classroom, to utilize support, and to communicate (Brittany).

Similarly, accommodations are another key component in the academic success of autistic and neurodiverse students at Alpha College (Chung et al., 2015; IDEA, 2004; Viesel et al., 2020). It is important that accommodations must be based in understanding of neurodivergent learning deficits. At Alpha College, faculty and support staff recognize that it is not enough to provide accommodations; students must be able to demonstrate the ability to access or utilize the accommodation for it to have value and benefit engagement. Therefore, Alpha College's faculty, learning specialists, and support staff identify access routes between the accommodation, the classroom experience, and the student to generate meaningful engagement and academic success. Student success at Alpha College demonstrates that this model works perfectly for autistic and neurodiverse students who have fixed academic skills, deficits, attention deficit, social deficits, communication deficits, rigidity, and performance deficits (Brittany).

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

Theoretical findings were reviewed, in tandem with the audio-recording, transcripts, field notes were taken during the individual interviews and the focus group interview along with the analytical memoing of the documents. The two theoretical findings: perception, and action were informed by the central and sub- research questions. Perception informs behaviors, while behaviors or actions are the delivery system of perception (Goffman, 1963). The relationship between perception and action impact autism because they reveal how autistic college students are perceived and how they are supported in the higher education setting. Positive perception of autism and the “other” equate to actions that enrich and enfranchise more effective academic and social supports and resources. Perception without action is a sentimental platitude, they fall nicely on the ear and fill the soul with hope, but in the end, are empty. Perception without action does not progress, enrich, or enfranchise. Similarly, action without perception is a ship lost at sea; it has no direction, purpose, focus, or intent. Actions based on no perception at all, reveal indifference to the success or failure of the “other” (Goffman, 1963). Like paint splattered on a wall, a few actions formed in indifference may by chance enfranchise a few but hardly represent the rich, thick, conscious, and intentional progression, enrichment, and enfranchisement of the “other” (Goffman, 1963). Worse still are actions based on negative perceptions. It stands to reason under social stigma theory that if positive perception informs positive behavior the equal and opposite effect must be true; negative perception informs negative behavior (Goffman, 1963). Negative perception breeds negative intent, while negative intent undermines progress, enrichment, and enfranchisement of the “other”. Perception and action are both represented at Alpha College because Alpha College progresses, enriches, and enfranchises the “other” (Goffman, 1963).

As autism population rates rise in the higher education community, it is critical for other institutions to have a reference or model for effective neurodivergent education. The empirical implications of this study fill a few of the gaps in the existing research on how institutions of higher education may more effectively support and enfranchise students with autism. Currently, best practices for students with autism in higher education involve testing and assignment accommodations. These accommodations typically allow students with autism or other neurodiverse learning differences to have more time to complete more lengthy assignments, such as term papers as well as additional time to complete quizzes and tests (Chung et al., 2015; IDEA, 2004; Viesel et al., 2020). Other less common accommodations are pull-out services, which remove the student from the general classroom to provide the student with instructional support or act as a supplemental service that reteaches the same material twice (Stokowski et al., 2020).

Alpha College has exclusively admitted formally diagnosed autistic and neurodiverse individuals from its inception, spanning over 35 years. I have not uncovered any body of work that examines autism in higher education from an institution that exclusively admits any neurodiverse student population. Therefore, this body of work contributes to the extension of the current best practices and demonstrates that effective academic support for autistic students in higher education is more than academic accommodations. This study answers the “how to” of autism in higher education, where the college as a culture and institution makes a holistic investment in the education, understanding, time, money, patience, and humility in the autistic individual, community, faculty, and staff. Alpha College’s unique atmosphere, infrastructural design, and pedagogical approach are the model for other institutions to draw inspiration and insight into how they may effectively support their autistic student population.

Compassion, acceptance, and understanding can bridge separatism (Brosnan & Mills, 2016). Although research about peer and adult interactions between neurotypical and autistic individuals is available it is limited. Existing research shows that when faculty and support staff receive awareness training (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Roth et al., 2018), professional development training for autism and neurodiverse learning differences (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Crompton et al., 2020; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Nevill & White, 2011; Roth et al., 2018; Stockwell et al., 2020; White et al., 2019), quality one-on-one experience (Nevill & White, 2011; White et al., 2019), increased social openness, decreased stigmatization, and positive perceptions manifest better conditions for learning (Brosnan & Mills, 2016; Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015; Nevill & White, 2011).

The data collected from the individual participants and the focus group from this study provided rich and thick evidence that Alpha College's positive perception of students with autism and neurodiverse learning differences creates an atmosphere where positive action are enacted by the saturation of their support staff, faculty, and student populations in complete and holistic supports. In lieu of their extensive and amassed continual professional development, resources, and knowledge training, these participants are considered content experts. Similarly, the data gleaned from the documents analysis provide a significant corroboration of the participants data and stand as rich, thick evidence that the infrastructural design, support programs, professional development, and resources back their vision as a competitive institution of higher education in the art, sciences, business, and technology specifically devoted to the undergraduate preparation and success of students with learning disabilities, ADHD, and other learning differences" (Alpha College Mission and Vision Statement, 2022). Lastly, the empirical implications contribute to the body of literature surrounding best practices for supporting students with autism in higher education.

Limitations and Delimitations

There are limitations and delimitations that exist within this study. Limitations from the current study can be observed in the low racial and ethnic diversity presented in the participant population. Delimitation incorporated were the narrowed criteria of the faculty and support staff's experience from the original 3 year to a minimum of 1 year of experience working with autistic students with a formal diagnosis. This adjustment was made as I learned more about the participant population. Another delimitation was the abdication of the ASD student voice. First-hand experiences from students at Alpha College were not collected during this study. The student viewpoint would add a rich and thick perspective that would further research insights on how Alpha College and institutions of higher education can more effectively support students with autism and other neurodiverse learning differences. Although this aspect was out of the central frame of this study, the effects on the student are undeniable. While this perspective is critical, I chose not to include it, as I wanted to understand how Goffman's (1963) social stigma theory impacted the atmosphere at Alpha College, and how those perceptions impacted the support services, resources, and programs provided to students with ASD. Additional limitations did not include those participants who have worked with students who are self-identified, those with secondary diagnosis, or those who previously had formal ASD diagnosis but were removed due to developmental progression that allows their ASD label to be diagnostically remove. This study may not be possible to replicate in future studies at institutions where neurodiverse enrollment is significantly lower or undocumented.

Self-identification and self-advocacy are high at Alpha College, partly because self-identification is required upon admittance to Alpha College school. Alpha College "award[s] bachelor's degrees exclusively to students with learning disabilities and ADHD, and we remain committed to students' success that help students achieve their goals" (About [Alpha College],

2022). This type of inclusive learning atmosphere is unique to Alpha College and may be difficult to replicate in other institutions without an overhaul of educational and cultural value systems. Therefore, it is understood that students at less inclusive institutions may not feel enfranchised to self-advocate or self-identify as openly as they do at Alpha College.

Recommendations for Future Research

In consideration of findings, limitations, and the delimitations placed on this study, several recommendations and directions for future research have been made. Future research should examine the types of services and areas of support provided to different neurotypes, such as ADD, ADHD, Dyslexia, and Anxiety at the college level. Furthermore, students with sensory sensitivities require different supports, resources, pedagogical strategies, and instructional needs than those of students with deficits that lie in attention, the delineation between these two conditions is therefore worth a deeper examination. Similarly, delimitation for future research should include a participant population with greater employment or educational criteria. Given the narrow population of the current study and lack of comparison, future research could compare support programs between large and small institutions, exclusive and inclusive institutions, neurotypical and neurodiverse populations, highly productive and low productive student populations. Furthermore, this study did not include the student's voice, as I wanted to understand how Goffman's (1963) social stigma theory directly impacted faculty and staff perceptions and therefore their actionable contributions to the enfranchisement of their students. However, the student voice is a critical feature in understanding how best to support and nurture the development of the ASD population (Cage & Howes, 2020; Ford, 2012; Scheef et al., 2019; Viezel et al., 2020). Therefore, future research should include the perspective of how best to support students with ASD from the student themselves.

Conclusion

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to describe how Alpha College, a private college in the southeastern United States with high neurodiverse enrollment, generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. Blume (1998) and Singer's (1999) theory of neurodiversity and Goffman's (1963) social stigma theory guided this study. This study described what an exclusively neurodiverse college does to produce high academic achievement for its autistic students. Furthermore, this study described how this unique college manages and overcomes social, emotional, mental, and physical challenges that commonly lead to degree incompleteness among autistic students. Lastly, this study demonstrated why this unique college is an effective example for more institutions to reference as a model for how they may also increase ASD graduation rates.

Data were collected, analyzed, and triangulated using individual interviews, a focus group, and document analysis of hiring protocol, professional development schedules, training documentation, and student support services webpages as outlined by Yin (2018). The central themes that emerged from the data were holistic education and faculty support. With the two central themes, four sub-themes were detected, and under holistic education, complete individualization and complete support services were revealed. While professional development and self-reflection emerged under faculty support. The implications for policy pertain to federal policies that may better meet the needs of the growing autistic student population in higher education. The implications for practice pertaining to the infrastructural design of university support programs and resources and pedagogical techniques rooted in the study of neurodivergent learning. The thematic implications of this study conclude that neurodiversity theory (Blume, 1998; Singer, 1999) and social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) are demonstrated within Alpha College's atmosphere, infrastructure, pedagogical techniques, support programs,

services, but mostly in the heart of its administration, faculty, and support staff. Alpha College demonstrates how positive perception informs positive attitude, which matriculates positive actions, which breed positive outcomes for not only its autism population but for all its neurodiverse students. The students are the lifeblood of Alpha College, while the faculty and support staff are the skeleton. At Alpha College, the whole student receives individualized instruction that delivers a holistic education where the mind, body, and spirit are stretched, molded, challenged, and nurtured. Alpha College strives to ensure its graduates leave with the confidence, ability, and tools to not only survive but flourish in a world that has yet to realize the true beauty of their minds and to see the real value in their differences. God tells us to live in harmony with one another, to build up his most precious, and think of others as more significant than ourselves. Another is defined as “being one more in addition to one or more of the same kind” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). At Alpha College, the “other” is the purpose and the mission; the “others” are in harmony with the typical, they are built up and supported, and their needs are more than first; they are the center. At Alpha College, the “other” is another.

References

- Ala í- Rosales, S., Roll-Pettersson, L., & Pinkelman, S. (2010). Emerging opportunities in higher education: Applied behavior analysis and autism. *European Journal of Behavior Analysis*, 11(2), 207-216. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1080/15021149.2010.11434344>
- Albrecht, G. L., Walker, V. G., & Levy, J. A. (1982). Social distance from the stigmatized: A test of two theories. *Social Science and Medicine*, 16(1), 1319-27.
- Anderson, A. M., Cox, B. E., Edelstein, A. W. (2019). Support systems for college students with autism spectrum disorder. *The College Student Affairs Journal*, 37(1), 14-27. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csaj.2019.0001>
- American Psychiatric Association, (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-V*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.
- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C. & 12101 (1990).
- Autistic Self Advocacy Network. (n.d.). *About Autism*. <https://autisticadvocacy.org/about-asan/about-autism/>
- Baer, D. M., Wolf, M. M., & Risley, T. R. (1968). Some current dimensions of applied behavior analysis. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*. 1(1), 91-97. <https://doi.org/10.1901/jaba.1968.1-91>
- Baio, Jon, Wiggins, L., Christensen, D. L., Maenner, M. J., Daniels, J., Warren, Z., Kurzius-Spencer, M., Zahorodny, W., Robinson Rosenberg, C., White, T., Durkin, M. S., Imm, P., Nikolaou, L., Yeargin-Allsopp, M., Lee, L., Harrington, R., Lopez, M., Fitzgerald, R. T., Hewitt, A., . . . Dowling, N. F. (2018). Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 8 years -autism and developmental disabilities monitoring network, 11

- sites, United States, 2014. *MMWR. Surveillance Summaries*, 67(6), 1-23.
<https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss6706a1>
- Bakker, T., Krabbendam, L., Bhulai, S., & Begeer, S. (2019). Background and enrollment characteristics of students with autism in higher education. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 67, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2019.101424>
- Barnhill, G. P. (2016). Supporting students with Asperger syndrome on college campuses: Current practices. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 31(1), 3-15.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1088357614523121>
- Bejnö, H., Bölte, S., Linder, N., Långh, U., Odom, S. L., & Roll-Pettersson, L. (2021). From someone who may cause trouble to someone, you can play with: Stakeholders' perspectives on preschool program quality for autistic children. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-05268-2>
- Bhaumik, S., Tyrer, F., Barrett, M., Tin, N., McGrother, W., & Kiani, R. (2010). The relationship between carriers' report of autistic traits in clinical diagnoses of autism spectrum disorders in adults with intellectual disability. *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 31, 705-712.
- Blacher, J., Howell, E., Lauderdale-Littin, S., DiGennaro Reed, F. D., & Laugeson, E. A. (2014). Autism spectrum disorder and the student-teacher relationship: A comparison study with peers with intellectual disability and typical development. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 8(3), 324-333. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2013.12.008>
- Blume, H. (1998, September 30). Neurodiversity: On the neurological underpinnings of geekdom. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved November 4, 2018.
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1998/09/neurodiversity/305909/>

- Bolourian, Y., Tipton-Fisler, L. A., & Yassine, J. (2018a; 2020;). Special education placement trends: Least restrictive environment across five years in California. *Contemporary School Psychology, 24*(2), 164-173. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-018-00214-z>
- Bolourian, Y., Zeedyk, S. M., & Blacher, J. (2018b). Autism and the university experience: Narratives from students with neurodevelopmental disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 48*(10), 3330-3343. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s108003-018-3599-5>
- Brosnan, M., & Mills, E. (2016). The effect of diagnostic labels on the affective responses of college students towards peers with ‘Asperger’s syndrome’ and ‘Autism spectrum disorder. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice, 20*(4), 388-394. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361315586721>
- Brown, P. C., Roediger III, H. L., & McDaniel, M. A. (2014). *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*. Harvard University Press.
- Browning, S., & Miron, P. (2007). Counseling students with autism and Asperger’s syndrome: A primer for success as a social being and a student. In J. A. Lippincott & R. B. Lippincott (Eds.), *Special populations in college counseling: A handbook for mental health professionals* (pp. 273–285). American Counseling Association.
- Bryce, C. I., Fraser, A. M. J., Fabes, R. A., & Alexander, B. L. (2021). The role of hope in college retention. *Learning and Individual Differences, 89*, 102033. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2021.102033>
- Burnard, P. (1991). A method of analyzing interview transcripts in qualitative research. *Nurse Education Today, 11*(6), 461-466. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-6917\(91\)90009-Y](https://doi.org/10.1016/0260-6917(91)90009-Y)
- Cage, E., De Andres, M., & Mahoney, P. (2020). Understanding the factors that affect university completion for autistic people. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 72*, 101519. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2020.101519>

- Cage, E., & Howes, J. (2020). Dropping out and moving on: A qualitative study of autistic people's experiences of university. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 24(7), 1664-1675. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320918750>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (2022). *CambridgeDictionary.org*. Retrieved January 16, 2023, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/culture>
- Caron, V., Jeanneret, N., Giroux, M., Guerrero, L., Ouimet, M., Forgeot d'Arc, B., Soulières, I., & Courcy, I. (2021). Sociocultural context and autistics' quality of life: A comparison between Québec and France. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 136236132110352-13623613211035229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211035229>
- Center for Disease Control. (2019). *Data and statistics on autism spectrum disorder*. Retrieved January 26, 2020, from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>
- Cernius, A. (2017). "Thou shalt not ration justice": The importance of autism insurance reform for military autism families, and the economic and national security implications of improving access to ABA therapy under TRICARE. *Journal of Legislation*, 44(2), 201-238.
- Chamak, B., & Bonniau, B. (2016). Trajectories, long-term outcomes, and family experiences of 76 adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 46(3), 1084-1095. <https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-015-2656-6>
- Chatzara, K., Karagiannidis, C., & Stamatis, D. (2016). Cognitive support embedded in self-regulated e-learning systems for students with special learning needs. *Education and Information Technologies*, 21(2), 283-299. <https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s10639-014-9320-1>

- Chebli, J. (2016). *Changing teachers' conceptions of Autism Spectrum Disorder: A training to increase knowledge, improve self-efficacy, and assess attitudes toward inclusion* [Unpublished MA thesis]. American University of Beirut.
- Child, J., & Langford, E., (2011). Exploring the learning experiences of nursing students with dyslexia. *Nursing Standard*, 25(40), 39-46. <https://doi.org/10.7748/ns.25.40.39.s49>
- Christian, L., & Poling, A. (1997). Using self-management procedures to improve the productivity of adults with developmental disabilities in a competitive employment setting. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 30(1), 169-172. <https://doi.org/10.1901/jaba.1997.30-169>
- Chung, W., Chung, S., Edgar-Smith, S., Palmer, R. B., Delambo, D., & Huang, W. (2015). An examination of in-service teacher attitudes toward students with autism spectrum disorder: Implications for professional practice. *Current Issues in Education* (Tempe, Ariz.), 18(2),
- Clouder, L., Karakus, M., Cinotti, A., Ferreyra, M. V., Fierros, G. A., & Rojo, P. (2020). Neurodiversity in higher education: A narrative synthesis. *Higher Education*, 80(4), 757-778. <https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00513-6>
- Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (2006). Qualitative research guidelines project. https://sswm.info/sites/default/files/reference_attachments/COHEN%202006%20Semistructured%20Interview.pdf
- Collins, M. E., & Mowbray, C. T. (2008). Students with psychiatric disabilities on campus: Examining predictors of enrollment with disabilities support services. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 21(2), 91-104.
- Connell, B. R., Jones, M., Mace, R., Mueller, J., Mullick, A., & Ostroff, E. (1997). *The principles of universal design*. <https://www.ncsu.edu/www/ncsu/design/sod5/cud>

- Connor, D. J. (2013). Kiss my asperger's: Turning the tables of knowledge. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 17(2), 111-129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2011.605911>
- Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2020). *Applied Behavior Analysis*, (3rd ed.), Pearson,
- Corrigan, P. W., Kerr, A., & Knudsen, L. (2005). The stigma of mental illness: Explanatory models and methods for change. *Applied & Preventive Psychology*, 11(3), 179-190. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appsy.2005.07.001>
- Couzens, D., Poed, S., Kataka, M., Brandon, A., Hartley, J., & Keen, D. (2015). Support for students with hidden disabilities in universities: A case study. *International Journal of Disability Disorders, Development and Education*, 62(1), <https://doi.org.10.1080/1034912X.2014.984592>
- Cox, B. E., (2017). *Autism coming to college* [Issue brief]. Center for Postsecondary Success.
- Cox, B. E., Edelstein, J., Brogdon, B., & Roy, A. (2021). Navigating challenges to facilitate success for college students with autism. *The Journal of Higher Education (Columbus)*, 92(2), 252-278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2020.1798203>
- Cox, B. E., Nachman, B. R., Thompson, K., Dawson, S., Edelstein, J. A., & Breeden, C. (2020). An exploration of actionable insights regarding college students with autism: A review of the literature. *Review of Higher Education*, 43(4), 935-966. <https://www.doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2020.0026>
- Creswell, J. & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Crockett, J. B., & Kauffman, J. M. (1998). Taking inclusion back to its roots. *Educational Leadership*, 56(2), 74.

- Crompton, C. J., Ropar, D., Evans-Williams, C. V., Flynn, E. G., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2020). Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 24(7), 1704-1712.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320919286>
- DeBerard, S. M., Spielmans, G. L., & Julka, D. L. (2004). Predictors of academic achievement and retention among college freshmen: A longitudinal study. *College Student Journal*, 38(1), 66-80.
- DeBrabander, K. M., Morrison, K. E., Jones, D. R., Faso, D. J., Chmielewski, M., & Sasson, N. J. (2019). Do first impressions of autistic adults differ between autistic and nonautistic observers? *Autism in Adulthood*, 1(4), 25-257. <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0018>
- Delve. (2022). *Coding software* [Computer software]. <https://delvetool.com>
- Dictionary.com. (2023). *Dictionary.com*. Retrieved January 17, 2023, from <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/enfranchise>
- Dryer, R., Henning, M. A., Tyson, G. A., & Shaw, R. (2016). Academic achievement performance of university students with disabilities: Exploring the influence of nonacademic factors. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, 63(4), 419-430.
- Dymond, S. K., Meadan, H., & Pickens, J. L. (2017). Postsecondary education and students with autism spectrum disorders: Experiences of parents and university personnel. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 29(5), 809-825.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10882-017-9558-9>
- Eisenhower, A. S., Bush, H. H., & Blacher, J. (2015). Student-teacher relationships and early school adaptation of children with ASD: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 31(3), 256-296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377903.2015.1056924>

- Eldevik, S., Hastings, R. P., Hughes, J. C., Jahr, E., Eikeseth, S., & Cross, S. (2009). Meta-analysis of early intensive behavior intervention for children with autism. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 38*(3), 439-450.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15374410902851739>
- Elias, R., Muskett, A. E., & White, S. W. (2019). Educator perspectives on the postsecondary transition difficulties of students with autism. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice, 23*(1), 260-264. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1362361317726246>
- Elias, R., & White, S. W. (2018). Autism goes to college: Understanding the needs of a student population on the rise. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 48*(3), 732-746.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3075-7>
- English Standard Version Bible*. (2022). Bible Hub.<https://www.biblehub.com>
- Fatscher, M., & Naughton, J. (2012). Students with Asperger syndrome. *Research & Teaching in Developmental Education, 28*, 40–44.
- Fors, C. D., (2012). *An investigation of support programs for college students with high-functioning autism or Asperger syndrome* [Doctoral dissertation]. The University of Missouri- Columbia.
- Friedman, B. A., & Mandel, R. G. (2009). The prediction of college student academic performance and retention: Application of expectancy and goal setting theories. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice, 11*(2), 227–246.
<https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.11.2.d>
- Galligan, M. G., Feinstein C., Sulkes, S.S., Bisagno, J. M., & Stein, M. T. (2013). Asperger syndrome and DSM-5: A dilemma for a college freshman. *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, 34*(7), 529-532. <https://doi.org/10.1097/DBP.0b013e3182a399a6>

- Garcia-Albea, E., Reeves, S. A., Brothers, K. L., & Reeves, k. F. (2014). Using audio script fading and multiple-exemplar training to increase vocal interactions in children with autism. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 47(2), 325-343.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jaba.125>
- Gardner, H. (2006). Multiple intelligences new horizons (Completely rev. and updated.). BasicBooks.
- Gerhardt, P. F. & Weiss, M. J. (n.d.). Behavior analytic interventions for adults with autism spectrum disorders. In E. A. Mayville and J. A. Mulick (Eds.), *Behavioral foundations of effective autism treatment*. Sloan Publishing.
- Gelbar, N. W., Shefyck, A., & Reichow, B. (2015). A comprehensive survey of current and former college students with autism spectrum disorders. *The Yale Journal of Biology & Medicine*, 88(1), 45-68.
- Getzel, E. E., & Thoma, C. A. (2008). Experiences of college students with disabilities and the importance of self-determination in higher education settings. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 31(2), 77-84. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0885728808317658>.
- Glickman, J. (2010). *U.S. Secretary of Education Duncan announces \$10.9 million in awards under new programs that help students with intellectual disabilities transition to postsecondary education* [Policy brief]. <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-secretary-education-duncan-announces-109-millions-awards-under-new-programs-he>.
- Gillespie-Lynch, K., Brooks, P. J., Someki, F., Obeid, R., Shane-Simpson, C., Kapp, S. K., Daou, N., & Smith, D. S. (2015). Changing college students' conceptions of autism: An online training to increase knowledge and decrease stigma. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 45(8), 2553-2566. <https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-015-2422-9>

- Gillespie-Lynch, K., Daou, N., Obeid, R., Reardon, S., Khan, S., & Goldknopf, E. J. (2021). What contributes to stigma towards autistic university students and students with other diagnoses? *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 51(2), 459-475.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04556-7>
- Gobbo, K., & Shmulsky, S. (2014). Faculty experience with college students with autism spectrum disorders: A qualitative study of challenges and solutions. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 29(1), 13-22.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1088357613504989>
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity* (First Touchstone ed.). Simon & Schuster.
- Gorycki, K. A., Ruppel, P. R., & Zane, T. (2020). Is long-term ABA therapy abusive: A response to Sandoval-Norton and Shkedy. *Cogent Psychology*, 7(1), 1823615.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2020.1823615>
- Gray, D. E. (1993). Perceptions of stigma: The parents of autistic children. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 15(1), 102-120. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.ep11343802>
- Higher Education Statistics Agency. (2019). Table 15 – UK domiciled student enrolments by disability and sex 2014/15 to 2017/18. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-15>
- Holmqvist, M., Anderson, L., Hellström, L., Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, & School development, and Leadership (SOL). (2019). Teacher educators' self-reported preparedness to teach students with special educational needs in higher education. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 77(5), 584-597.
<https://www.doi.org/10.33225/pec/19.77.584>

- Hong, J., Bishop-Fitzpatrick, L., Smith, L., Greenberg, J. S., & Mailick, M. R. (2016). Factors associated with subjective quality of life of adults with autism spectrum disorder: Self-report vs. maternal reports. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *46*(4), 1368-1378. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-015-2678-0>
- Hu, Q., & Chandrasekhar, T. (2021). Meeting the mental health needs of college students with ASD: A survey of university and college counseling center directors. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *51*(1), 341-345. <https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04530-3>
- Idol, L. (2006). Toward inclusion of special education students in general education: A program evaluation of eight schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, *27*(2), 77-94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325060270020601>
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C & 1400 (2004).
- Jaarsma, P., & Welin, S. (2012). Autism as a natural human variation: Reflections on the claims of the neurodiversity movement. *Health Care Analysis*, *20*(1), 20-30. <https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s10728-011-0169-9>
- Jackson, S. L. J., Hart, L., & Volkmar, F. R. (2018). Preface: Special Issue—College experiences for students with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *48*(3), 639-642. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3463-7>
- Jansen, D., Emmers, E., Petry, K., Mattys, L., Noens, I., & Baeyens, D. (2018). Functioning and participation of young adults with ASD in higher education according to the ICF framework. *Journal of further and Higher Education*, *42*(2), 259-275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2016.1261091>

- Jones, R. S. P., Huws, J. C., & Beck, G. (2013). 'I'm not the only person out there': Insider and outsider understandings of autism. *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities*, 59(2), 134-144. <https://doi.org/10.1179/2047387712Y.0000000007>
- Kapp, S. K., Gillespie-Lynch, K., Sherman, L. E., & Hutman, T. (2013). Deficit, difference, or both? Autism and neurodiversity. *Developmental Psychology*, 49(1), 59-71. <https://www.doi.org/10.1037/a002835>
- Keenan, M., Dillenburger, K., Röttgers, H. R., Dounavi, K., Jónsdóttir, S. L., Moderato, P., Schenk, Jacqueline J. A. M, Virués-Ortega, J., Roll-Pettersson, L., & Martin, N. (2014;2015;). Autism and ABA: The gulf between north America and Europe. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 2(2), 167-183. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-014-0045-2>
- Kim, S. Y., (2021). College disability service office staff members' autism attitudes and knowledge. *Remedial and Special Education*, 1-12. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0741932521999460>
- Kim, S. Y., & Crowley, S. (2021). Understanding perceptions and experiences of autistic undergraduate students toward disability support offices of their higher education institutions. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 113, 103956-103956. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2021.103956>
- Kingsbury, C. G., Sibert, E. C., Killingback, Z., & Atchison, C. L. (2020). "Nothing about us without us:" the perspectives of autistic geoscientists on inclusive instructional practices in geoscience education. *Journal of Geoscience Education*, 68(4), 302-310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10899995.2020.1768017>

- Krantz, P. J., & McClannahan, L. E., (1993). Teaching children with autism to initiate to peers: Effects of a script-fading procedure. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 26(1), 121-132. <https://doi.org/10.1901/jaba.1993.26-121>
- Krantz, P. J., & McClannahan, L. E., (1998). Social interaction skills for children with autism: A script-fading procedure for beginning readers. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 31(2), 191-202. <https://doi.org/https://dx.doi.10.1901%2Fjaba.1998.31-191>
- Lai, M., Anagnostou, E., Wiznitzer, M., Allison, C., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2020). Evidence-based support for autistic people across the lifespan: Maximising potential, minimizing barriers, and optimising the person–environment fit. *Lancet Neurology*, 19(5), 434-451. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422\(20\)30034-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422(20)30034-X)
- Leblanc, L., W. Richardson, & Burns, K.A. (2009). Autism Spectrum Disorder and the inclusive classroom: Effective training to enhance knowledge of ASD and evidence-based practices. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 32(2), 166–179. <https://www.doi:10.1177/0741932507334279>
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Natural Inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Link, B. G. (1987). Understanding labeling effects in the area of mental health disorders: An assessment of the effects of expectations of rejection. *American Sociological Review*, 52, 96-112.
- Lombardi, A. R. & Lalor, A. R. (2017). Faculty and administrator knowledge and attitudes regarding disability. In E. Kim & K.C. Aquino (Eds.). *Disability as Diversity in Higher Education*, (pp. 107–121). Routledge.
- MacDuff, J. L., Ledo, R., McClannahan, L. E., & Krantz, P. J. (2007). Using scripts and script-fading procedures to promote bids for joint attention by young children with autism.

Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders, 1(4), 281-290.

<https://doi.org/https://dx.doi.org/www.2.lib.ku.edu/10.1016/j.rasd.2006.11.003>

- Maenner, M. J., Shaw, K. A., Baio, J., Washington, A., Patrick, M., DiRienzo, M., Christensen, D. L., Wiggins, L. D., Pettygrove, S., Andrews, J. G., Lopez, M., Hudson, A., Baroud, T., Schwenk, Y., White, T., Rosenberg, C. R., Lee, L., Harrington, R. A., Huston, M., . . . PhD-7. (2020). Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 8 years - autism and developmental disabilities monitoring network, 11 sites, united states, 2016. *MMWR. Surveillance Summaries*, 69(4), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss6904a1>
- Markowitz, F. E. (1998). The effects of stigma on the psychological well-being and life satisfaction of people with mental illness. *Journal of Health & Social Behavior*, 39, 335-347.
- Marques, S. C., Gallagher, M. W., & Lopez, S. J. (2017). Hope-and academic-related outcomes: A meta-analysis. *School Mental Health*, 9, 250–262.
- Marsack, C. N., & Perry, T. E. (2018). Aging in place in every community: Social exclusion experiences of parents of adult children with autism spectrum disorder. *Research on Aging*, 40(6), 535-557. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0164027517717044>
- Mason, D., McConachie, H., Garland, D., Petrou, A., Rodgers, J., & Parr, J. R. (2018). Predictors of quality of life for autistic adults. *Autism Research*, 11(8), 1138-1147. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.1965>
- Mayville, E. A., & Letso, S. (2010). Family and community curricular content for training in applied behavior analysis and autism. *European Journal of Behavior Analysis*, 11(2), 229-237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15021149.2010.11434347>
- Mazumder, R., & Thompson-Hodgetts, S. (2019). Stigmatization of children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders and their families: A scoping study. *Review Journal of*

- Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 6(1), 96-107.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s40489-018-00156-5>
- McMorris, C. A., Baraskewich, J., Ames, M. A., Shaikh, K. T., Ncube, B. L., & Bebko, J. M. (2019). Mental health issues in post-secondary students with autism spectrum disorder: Experiences in accessing services. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 17(3), 585-595. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-018-9988-3>
- Merriam-Webster. (2023). *Merriam-Webster.com*. Retrieved January 25th, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/another>
- Mertens, D. M. (2009). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Ministère de la Santé et des Services Sociaux du Québec. (2016, June). *Statistiques de santé et de bien être selon le sexe— Tout le Québec* (Health and wellness statistics by gender- of Quebec]. Statistique Canada.
- Moola, F. J. (2015). The road to the ivory tower: The learning experiences of students with disabilities. *Research in Education*, 4(1), 45-70.
- Morrison, K. E., DeBrabander, K. M., Faso, D. J., & Sasson, N. J. (2019). Variability in first impressions of autistic adults made by neurotypical raters is driven more by characteristics of the raters than by characteristics of autistic adults. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 23(7), 1817-1829.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1362361318824104>
- Mulholland, S., & Cumming, T. M. (2016). Investigating teacher attitudes of disability using a non-traditional theoretical framework of attitude. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 80, 93-100. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.10.001>

- Murray, C., Flannery, B., K., & Wren, C. (2008). University staff members' attitudes and knowledge about learning disabilities and disability support services. *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*, 21(2), 73–90.
- Murray, C., Lombardi, A. R., & Wren, C. (2011). The effects of disability-focused training on the attitudes and perceptions of university staff. *Remedial and Special Education*, 32(4), 290-300. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0741932510362188>
- Myers, S.M. & Johnson, C. P. (2007). Management of children with autism spectrum disorders. *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 120,1162-1182.
- Nah, Y., & Tan, J. W. (2021). The effect of diagnostic labels on teachers' perceptions of behaviors of students with autism spectrum disorder. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 91(1), 315-327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12368>
- National Standards Project Report (2009). *National Autism Center*. Retrieved November 2, 2010, from [National Autism Center at May Institute](#)
- Nevill, R. E. A., & White, S. W. (2011). College students' openness toward autism spectrum disorders: Improving peer acceptance. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 41(12), 1619-1628. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-011-1189-x>
- Newman, L. A., & Madaus, J. W. (2015). An analysis of factors related to receipt of accommodations and services by postsecondary students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 36(4), 208-219. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932515572912>
- Newman, L., Wagner, M., & Knokey, A. M., et al. (2011). *The post-high school outcomes of young adults with disabilities up to 8 years after high school: A report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. NCSER: 2011-3005. Washington, DC: National Center for Special Education Research.

- New York State Department of Health Early Intervention Program. (1999). *Clinical practice guideline: The guideline technical report Autism/pervasive developmental disorders*. New York.
- Nicolaidis, C., Raymaker, D., Kapp, S. K., Baggs, A., Ashkenazy, E., McDonald, K., Weiner, M., Maslak, J., Hunter, M., & Joyce, A. (2019). The AASPIRE practice-based guidelines for the inclusion of autistic adults in research as co-researchers and study participants. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 23(8), 2007-2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319830523>
- Nuske, A., Rillotta, F., Bellon, M., & Richdale, A. (2019). Transition to higher education for students with autism: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 12(3), 280-295. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000108>
- Padden, L., & Ellis, C. (2015). Disability awareness and university staff training in Ireland (Practice Brief). *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*. 28(4), 433-445.
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2013;2016;). Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533-544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrity theory and practice* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Petcu, S. D., Zhang, D., & Li, Y. (2021). Students with autism spectrum disorders and their first-year college experiences. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(22), 11822. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182211822>
- Radzimski, V., Leung, F., Sargent, P., & Prat, A. (2021). Small-scale learning in a large-scale class: A blended model for team teaching in mathematics. *PRIMUS : Problems*,

Resources, and Issues in Mathematics Undergraduate Studies, 31(1), 1-16.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10511970.2019.1625472>

Reagon, K. A., & Higbee, T. S. (2009). Parent-implemented script fading to promote play-based verbal initiations in children with autism. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 42(3), 659-664. <https://doi.org/10.1901/jaba.2009.42-659>

Rekers, G. A., & Lovaas, O. I. (1974). Behavioral treatment of deviant sex role behaviors in a male child 1. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 7(2), 173–190.

Robertson, S. M., & Ne'eman, A. D. (2008). Autistic acceptance, the college campus, and technology: Growth of neurodiversity in society and academia. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 28(4). <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v28i4.146>

Roche, J. M., Zgonnikov, A., & Morett, L. M. (2021). Cognitive processing of miscommunication in interactive listening: An evaluation of listener indecision and cognitive effort. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 64(1), 159-175. https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_JSLHR-20-00128

Roll-Pettersson, L., Gena, A., Eldevik, S., Moderato, P., Sigurdardottir, Z. G., Dillenburger, K., Keenan, M., & Ala'i-Rosales, S. (2020). Higher education and behavior analysis in Europe: Creating a unified approach for the training of autism professionals. *European Journal of Behavior Analysis*, 21(1), 158-184. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15021149.2020.1758990>

Roth, D., Pure, T., Rabinowitz, S., & Kaufman-Scarborough, C. (2018). Disability awareness, training, and empowerment: A new paradigm for raising disability awareness on a university campus for faculty, staff, and students. *Social Inclusion*, 6(4), 116-124. <https://www.doi.org/10.17645/si.v6i4.1636>

- Saade, S., Bean, Y. F., Gillespie-Lynch, K., Poirier, N., & Harrison, A. J. (2021). Can participation in an online ASD training enhance attitudes toward inclusion, teaching self-efficacy and ASD knowledge among preservice educators in diverse cultural contexts? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1-16.
<https://www.doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1931716>
- Saaybi, S., AlArab, N., Hannoun, S., Saade, M., Toutounji, R. T., Zeeni, C., Shbarou, R., Hourani, R., & Boustany, R. M. (2019). Pre- and post-therapy assessment of clinical outcomes and white matter integrity in autism spectrum disorder: Pilot study. *Frontiers in Neurology*, 10, 877-877. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fneur.2019.00877>
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Sandoval-Norton, A. H., & Shkedy, G. (2019). How much compliance is too much compliance: Is long-term ABA therapy abuse? *Cogent Psychology*, 6(1)
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2019.1641258>
- Sandoval-Norton, A. H., Shkedy, G., & Shkedy, D. (2021). Long-term ABA therapy is abusive: A response to Gorycki, Ruppel, and Zane. *Advances in Neurodevelopmental Disorders*, 5(2), 126-134. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41252-021-00201-1>
- Sanford, C., Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R., Knokey, A. M. & Shaver, D. (2011). *The post-high school outcomes of young adults with disabilities up to 6 years after high school: Key findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study- 2 (NLTS2) (NCSE 2011-3004)*. SRI International. <https://www.nlts2.org/reports>
- Sarrett, J. C. (2018). Autism and accommodations in higher education: Insights from the autism community. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 48, 679-693.

Sasson, N. J., Faso, D. J., Nugent, J., Lovell, S., Kennedy, D.P., & Grossman, R.B. (2017).

Neurotypical peers are less willing to interact with those with autism based on thin slice judgements. *Scientific Reports*, 7(1), 1-10. <https://www.doi.org/10.1038/srep40700>

Scheef, A. R., McKnight-Lizotte, M., Gwartney, L. (2019). Supports and resources valued by autistic students enrolled in postsecondary education. *Autism in Adulthood*, 1(3), 219–226.

Shareef, M. A., AlAmodi, A. A., Al-Khateeb. A. A., Abudan, Z., Alkhani, M. A., Zebian, S. I., et al. (2015). The interplay between academic performance and quality of life among preclinical students. *BMC Medical Education*, 16, 193.

Shattuck, P. T., Narendorf, S. C., Cooper, B., et al. (2012). Postsecondary education and employment among youth with an autism spectrum disorder. *Pediatrics* 129(6), 1042-1049.

Shaw, S. C. K., & Anderson, J. L. (2018). The experiences of medical students with dyslexia: An interpretive phenomenological study. *Dyslexia*, 24(3), 220-233.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1587>

Seirup, H., & Rose, S. (2011). Exploring the effects of hope on GPA and retention among college undergraduate students on academic probation. *Education Research International*, 2011.

Shackelford, A. L. (2010). Respond to challenges of students with Asperger on campus.

Disability Compliance for Higher Education, 16(1), 3-5. <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/doi/epdf/10.1002/dhe.20032>

Silva, C., Jover, C., Da Fonseca, D., Esteves, F., & Deruelle, C. (2020;2019;). Acting on observed social exclusion and pro-social behavior in autism spectrum disorder. *Autism:*

The International Journal of Research and Practice, 24(1), 233-245.

<https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1362361319857578>

Singer, J. (1999). Why can't you be normal for once in your life?: From a problem with no name to the emergence of a new category of difference. In M. Corker & S. French (Eds.), *Disability Discourse* (pp. 59–67). Open University Press.

Smith, A., & Bell, S. (2015). Towards inclusive learning environments (TILE): Developing the 'roadmap for the inclusion of students with special educational needs in vocational education and workplace settings'. *Support for Learning*, 30(2), 150-160.

Stadler-Heer, S. (2019). Inclusion. *ELT Journal*, 73(2), 219-222.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccz004>

Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. Guilford Press.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Stauch, T., Plavnick, J., Sankar, S., & Gallagher, A. (2018). Teaching social perception skills to adolescents with autism and intellectual disabilities using video-based group instruction.

Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 51(3), 647-666. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaba.473>

Stockwell, K. M., Bottini, S., Jaswal, V. K., & Gillis, J. M. (2020). Brief Report: Social behavior and special interests in the stigmatization of autistic college students. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 27(1), 1-9.

<https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04769-w>

Stokowski, S., Li, B., Hutchens, N. S., Bell, C. A., & Shaw, A. A. (2020). "Students are the reason most of us have jobs": Sport management faculty members' perceptions of and attitudes toward students. *The Physical Educator*, 77(5), 854-878.

<https://www.doi.org/10.18666/TPE-2020-V77-I5-10270>

- Stone, W. L. (1987). Cross-disciplinary perspectives on autism. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, *12*(4), 615–630.
- Strand, L. R. (2017). Charting relations between intersectionality theory and the neurodiversity paradigm. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *37*(2), <https://www.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i2.5374>
- Sturm, A., & Kasari, C. (2019). Academic and psychosocial characteristics of incoming college freshmen with autism spectrum disorder: The role of comorbidity and gender. *Autism Research*, *12*(6), 931-940. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2099n>
- Swain, K. D., Nordness, P. D., & Leader-Janssen, E. M. (2012). Changes in preservice teacher attitudes toward inclusion. *Preventing School Failure*, *56*(2), 75-81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2011.565386>
- The United States Department of Justice. (2022). *Title IX*. Retrieved November 6, 2022, from <https://www.justice.gov/crt/title-ix>
- Tipton, L. A., & Blacher, J. (2014). Brief report: Autism awareness: Views from a campus community. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *44*(2), 477-483. <https://www.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-013-1893-9>
- Top Hat Glossary. (2022). *Graduation rate*. Retrieved February 16, 2022, from <https://tophat.com/glossary/g/graduation-rate/>
- Tubele, S., Margevica, I., Bolton, D., Doan, K., & McGinley, V. A. (2017). Latvian college students' perspectives on inclusion. *The Journal of International Special Needs Education*, *20*(2), 90-99. <https://doi.org/10.9782/JISNE-D-15-00038.1>
- United States Surgeon General (1999), *Mental health: A report of the Surgeon General*. Department of Health and Human Service. Retrieved from The Library of Congress, <https://lccn.loc.gov/2002495357>

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). The condition of education 2019 (NCES 2019-144), undergraduate retention and graduation rates.

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_ctr.asp.

Vadnjal, J., & Radoja, D. (2020). Business school teachers' experiences with a student with autism spectrum disorder. *CEPS Journal*, 10(1), 167-189.

<https://doi.org/10.26529/cepsj.270>

Veelen, R., Veldman, J., Van Laar, C., & Derks, B. (2020). Distancing from a stigmatized social identity: State of the art and future research agenda on self-group distancing. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(6), 1089-1107. <https://www.doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2714>

Viezel, K. D., Williams, E., & Dotson, W. H. (2020). College-based support programs for students with autism. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 35(4), 234-245. <https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1088357620954369>

Vincent, J. (2019). It's the fear of the unknown: Transition from higher education for young autistic adults. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 23(6), 1575-1585. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318822498>

Vincent, J., Potts, M., Fletcher, D., Hodges, S., Howells, J., Mitchell, A., Mallon, B., & Ledger, T. (2017). 'I think autism is like running on windows while everyone else is a mac': Using a participatory action research approach with students on the autism spectrum to rearticulate autism and the lived experience of university. *Education Action Research*, 25(2), 300-315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2016.1153978>

Virués- Ortega, J. (2010). Applied behavior analytic intervention for autism in early childhood: Meta-analysis, meta-regression, and dose-response meta-analysis of multiple outcomes. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30(4), 387-399. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.10.004>

- Vismara, L. A., & Rogers, S. J. (2010). Behavior treatments in autism spectrum disorder: What do we know? *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 6, 447-468.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.clinpsy.121208.131151>
- von Below, R., Spaeth, E., & Horlin, C. (2021). Autism in higher education: Dissonance between educators' perceived knowledge and reported teaching behavior. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1988159>
- Walters, S. (2015). Toward a critical ASD pedagogy of insight: Teaching, researching, and valuing the social literacies of neurodiverse students. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 49(4), 340-360.
- Weinberger, J., Keegan, E., & Rowan, A. (2006). Perception. In R. Skelton, *The Edinburgh international encyclopedia of psychoanalysis*. Edinburgh University Press. Credo
 Reference:
<http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/edinburghpsychoa/perception/0?institutionId=5072>
- Wenzel, C., & Brown, J.T. (2014). Beyond academic intelligence: Increasing college success for students on the autism spectrum. In F. R. Volkmar, S. J. Rogers, R. Paul, K. A. Pelphrey (eds.), *Handbook of autism and pervasive developmental disorders* (Vol. 2). Wiley.
- Wenzel, C., & Rowley, L. (2010). Teaching social skills and academic strategies to college students with asperger's syndrome. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 42(5), 44-50.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/004005991004200505>
- Westrick, P. A., Le, H., Robbins, S. B., Radunzel, J. M., & Schmidt, F. L. (2015). College performance and retention: A meta-analysis of the predictive validities of ACT® scores, high school grades, and SES. *Educational Assessment*, 20(1), 23-45.

- Wetson, C., Gandell, T., Beauchamp, J., McAlpine, L., Wiseman, C., & Beauchamp, C. (2002). Analyzing interview data: The development and evolution of a coding system. *Qualitative Sociology*, 24(3), 381-400. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:101069090>
- White, D., Hillier, A., Frye, A., & Makrez, E. (2019). College students' knowledge and attitudes towards students on the autism spectrum. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 49(7), 2699–2705.
- White, S. W., Elias, R., Salinas, C. E., Capriola, N., Conner, C. M., Asselin, S. B., Miyazaki, Y., Mazefsky, C. A., Howlin, P., & Getzel, E. E. (2016). Students with autism spectrum disorder in college: Results from a preliminary mixed methods needs analysis. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 56, 29-40. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2016.05.010>
- White, S. W., Ollendick, T. H., & Bray, B. C. (2011). College students in the autism spectrum: prevalence and associated problems. *Autism* 15 (6), 683-701.
- Williams, K. D. (2001). *Ostracism: The power of silence*. Guilford Press.
- Yin, R. (2018). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publishing.
- Zeedyk, S. M., Bolourian, Y., & Blacher, J. (2019). University life with ASD: Faculty knowledge and student needs. *Autism: The International Journal of Research and Practice*, 23(3), 726-736. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318774148>
- Zhen, R., Liu, R., Ding, Y., Liu, Y., Wang, J., & Xu, L. (2018). The moderating role of intrinsic value in the relation between psychological needs support and academic engagement in mathematics among Chinese adolescent students: support, intrinsic value, and engagement. *International Journal of Psychology*, 53(4), 313-320. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ijop.12374>

Appendix A: Liberty University IRB Approval Letter

LU- IRB Approval Letter.pdf - Adobe Acrobat Reader DC (64-bit)

File Edit View Sign Window Help

Home Tools LU- IRB Approval L... x ? Sign In

1 / 46

Date: 5-12-2022

IRB #: IRB-FY21-22-805
Title: "EMBRACING DIVERSE THINKERS": A CASE STUDY THAT EXAMINES THE GRADUATION RATES FROM A HIGH AUTISM COLLEGE STUDENT POPULATION
Creation Date: 2-24-2022
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Beverly Donovan
Review Board: Research Ethics Office
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Limited	Decision	Exempt - Limited IRB

Key Study Contacts

Member	Role	Contact
Andrea Bruce	Co-Principal Investigator	
Beverly Donovan	Principal Investigator	
Beverly Donovan	Primary Contact	

Appendix B: Alpha College IRB Approval Letter

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DECISION FORM

Date: 10/12/2022

Title of Research: Embracing Diverse Thinkers: A Case Study that Examines the Graduation Rates from a High Autism College Student Population

Principal Investigator (PI): Beverly Austin Donovan, Liberty University

Brief Description of method(s): The researcher will identify correlating themes from first-hand experiences of staff who work with neurodiverse students in secondary education. Interviews, a focus group, and document analysis will be used.

Participants: Twelve to fifteen administrative and support staff from the Navigator Transition Program will be interviewed.

Results of IRB Review:

Reviewer #1: Dustin Boise, MFA	APPROVED
Reviewer #2: Jamie Flemings, DBA	APPROVED
Reviewer #3: Shelly Chandler, PhD, LMHC	APPROVED
Reviewer #4: Richard Perrone, PhD	APPROVED

Appendix C: Consent Form

Title of the Project: Embracing Diverse Thinkers: A Case Study that Examines the Graduation Rates from a High Autism and Neurodiverse College Student Population

Principal Investigator: Beverly Donovan, Ph. D. Candidate in Curriculum and Instruction, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be employed at Alpha College for a minimum of 1 year and have experience working directly with formally diagnosed students with autism. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this case study is to describe how Alpha College generates uniquely high graduation rates for its autistic student population. My goal is to examine how the support programs, activities, and social climate create an environment for autistic students at Alpha College to succeed in completing their degrees. The purpose is to feature multiple ways in which other colleges may better support and advocate for their autistic student population based on Alpha College's model.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

Individual Interview Participants:

Participate in a brief, in-person, or virtual interview lasting 60-90 minutes. Interviews will be audio-recorded to ensure a clear and thorough transcription.

OR

Focus Group Participants: Participate in a brief in-person or virtual focus group lasting approximately 40-60 minutes. Focus groups will be audio-recorded to ensure a clear and thorough transcription

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from participating in this study.

Benefits to society include providing more insight on the academic and social success of all neurodiverse and especially autism communities. Additionally, the insights gleaned from the interviews may benefit the professional development as well as the growth and development of Alpha College's ASD and neurodiverse support programs. Benefits to society include the deepening of knowledge and understanding in ways that may help higher education to better enfranchise the autism community by improving academic success through increased college graduation rates.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location of the participants choosing where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and hard copy data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and hard copy data will be shredded.
- Interviews and the focus group will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for 3 years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Alpha College. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Austin Donovan. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Bruce, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records.

The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix D: Interview Semi- Structured Questions

1. Based on your experience of working at Alpha College, how would you describe Alpha College? SQ3
2. What does Alpha College do best? SQ1
3. What role do you play in supporting autistic students? SQ2
4. What campus social activities does Alpha College sponsor to help autistic students form peer relationships? SQ2
5. What academic activities does Alpha College have to help autistic students succeed? SQ2
6. Please describe your first encounter with an autistic student. SQ3
7. How did that experience shape your feelings and opinions about autism? SQ3
8. Describe some of the biggest academic challenges you have seen students with ASD face. SQ3
9. Describe some of the hardest social struggles you have witnessed students with ASD confront. Please use any anecdotes or observations you have made. SQ3
10. Why do you think Alpha College is able to keep autistic students from dropping out? CRQ
11. Why do you think Alpha College generates a higher graduation rate of autistic students than other colleges? CRQ
12. Where do you see the most support, resources, and help given to students with ASD? SQ3
13. What professional support, training, or guidance have you received pertaining specifically to ASD? SQ1
14. What support, resources, and services would you like to see added to Alpha College's services? SQ2

15. How has the Alpha College prepared you to manage and help autistic students? Is training continual? SQ1

Appendix E: Focus Group Semi-Structured Questions

1. What role does your department play in helping autistic students at Alpha College?
2. How often does your department interact with autistic students?
3. What are the biggest challenges autistic students face entering college?
4. What are the greatest advantages autistic students have when entering college?
5. What are the most common services, activities, or accommodations your department provides for autistic students at Alpha College?
6. What makes Alpha College effective at supporting autistic students to complete their degrees? CRQ
7. What could your department or Alpha College do better to support higher graduation rates of autistic students? SQ1 & SQ2

Appendix F: Document Analysis Inquiry Email

Hello- (Potential Participant)

I am reaching out as Dr. "C" recommended your input for my dissertation research, with which I know you can sympathize. I recently received approval from [Alpha's] IRB as I am currently a doctoral candidate in Education, Curriculum, and Instruction at Liberty University. Mostly, I am an Autism mom as I have two young children with ASD, my daughter Annabelle (7) and my son Jack-Jack (5).

I am an educator turned academic researcher in response to my children's diagnosis. All of my plans, including professional goals, changed the day my children were diagnosed with Autism, my son level 3 severe, non-verbal, and my daughter level 2 moderate with significant communicant delays. As Dr. "C" spoke about Beacon's successful support programs for neurodiverse learners and your contributions to your local community, I was sparked with excitement personally while intrigued professionally and academically. Most importantly, your programs give hope to parents, students, and children like mine.

As a stakeholder in the Autism community and educational research, Beacon provides a critical need for our shared community. I am currently researching how institutions in higher education are supporting neurodiverse learners, as they are a growing population. Beacon is leading the charge for more inclusion, support, and empowerment of neurodiverse learners, I am compelled to learn more about how and what your college and staff do to support this population. With any hope, other institutions will look to your school's model and replicate your success so that more kids like mine have opportunities to further their education and expand a historically marginalized future.

Therefore, I am graciously asking if you would be interested in participating in a short 15-question interview with me, of which we can do virtually so as not to disrupt your schedule. My goal is to gain first-hand insight into how the administration helps facilitate a supportive and

inclusive atmosphere. I want to understand what Beacon does to generate high graduation rates for this population. All participants, including the school itself, will be protected and unidentified. The goal is to showcase your work to inform other institutions about the strengths and residual benefits of inclusive atmospheres, adaptive instructional techniques, and extensive support services so they may be replicated. Beacon College is the model other institutions should be following; let's show them how it's done!

My mission, like yours, is to celebrate unique learners through a collaborative partnership that cultivates more inclusion and accessible living, learning, and work environments while setting the course to help develop and enfranchise the future for students with learning differences. I am deeply inspired and moved by the work Beacon is putting into the Autism community; because of your work, my children have choices and more hope than ever.

Lastly, I have included my IRB approval letter and Consent form that details my research for you if you are interested in participating. Thank you for your time and consideration, and mostly for your institution's contributions to the neurodiverse community.

Warm Regards,

Beverly A. Donovan

(540) 580-7062

Ph. D. Candidate, Curriculum, and Instruction

bdonovan@liberty.edu

Appendix G: Participant Pseudonym Key: Individual Interview Group

Participant	Legal Name
Ashton	Protected
Brittany	Protected
Carol	Protected
Diane	Protected
Ethan	Protected
Francis	Protected
Gino	Protected
Hank	Protected
Ivana	Protected
Jill	Protected
Karl	Protected

Appendix H: Participant Pseudonym Key: Focus Group

Participants	Legal Name
P1	Protected
P2	Protected
P3	Protected
P4	Protected

Appendix I: Individual Interview Data Analysis Spreadsheet

Pre-Codes	Themes							
Perception	Holistic							
			Enfranchisement		STR's			
Attitude					Attitude/ Perception			
			Support Services		Mental Health	Peer		
Stigma					Learning Specialists	Social		
					Programs	Tutoring		
Knowledge						Social		
						Academic		
Training			Transition		Activities	Student Learning Center		
					Physical	Transition		
Mental Health						Writing Center		
						Social		
Social Isolation						Life Skills		
						Personal Trainers		
Peer Relationships	Faculty Support		Training	Title IX	Training/ P.D.			
						Annual		
Support Services				Professional Development	Training/ P.D.	Continual		
							Bi Month	
Pedagogy				Pedagogy	Training/ P.D.			
					Supports	Colleagues		
STR's							Manic Monday	
					Resources	OT		
						Learning Specialist		
						IT		
				Behavioral Management	Training/ P.D.	Continual		
					Resources	OT		
						Learning Specialist		
			Self-Reflection	Accountability				
				Blind Spots				
				Perception				
	Outlier		No more Resources					
				Behavioral Management				
					Love			

Appendix J: Focus Group Data Analysis Spreadsheet

Pre-Codes						
Perception	Observed	Q1 Q4				
Attitude	Observed	Q1 Q4		ASD Advangetages		Holistic
Stigma				ASD Advangetages		
Knowledge	Observed	Q3		Sensory Emotional Regualtion Executive Functioning		Faculty Support
Training	Observed	Q5 Q6		Continual Annual		
Mental Health						
Social Isolation						
Peer Realtionships	Observed	Q3		Emotional Regulation		Holistic
Support Services	Observed	Q2 Q5 Q6		Summer Program Parent Support	Webinars Given Voice Continued Outreach	Holistic
Pedagogy				Transition Prep	3,6,9 month Webinars	
STR's	Self-Reflection	Observed	Q7	More Access to Student		
					Additional Meetings	

Appendix K: Document Analysis Spreadsheet

Pre-Codes	Transition Documents	Support Services	Web-Site	Provost	Theme
			Career Development		
			HR		
			Writing Center		
			Center for Student Success		
			Library		
			Admissions		
			OT		
			Fitness		
Perception			Observed		Holistic
Attitude			Observed		
Stigma					
Knowledge	Observed	Observed	Observed	Observed	Faculty Support
Training	Observed	Observed	Observed	Observed	
Mental Health	Observed		Observed		
Social Isolation					
Peer Relationships	Observed	Observed	Observed	Observed	
Support Services					Holistic
Pedagogy		Observed	Observed	Observed	
STR's					

Appendix L: Professional Development Training Documentation Data Sample

Accommodations

- **Communicating**
 - **Be concrete and specific Avoid using vague terms like later, maybe, "why did you do that?"**
 - **Use less words**
 - **Slow down the pace**
 - **If necessary for understanding, break tasks down into steps**
 - **Use gestures, modeling, and demonstrations with verbalization**
 - **Provide accurate, prior information about change & expectations**
 - **Specifically engage attention visually, verbally, or physically**
 - **Avoid idioms, double meanings, and sarcasm**
 - **Pause, listen, and wait**
 - **Model correct format without correction**
 - **Encourage input and choice when possible**

Appendix M: Partial Professional Development Training Schedule and Topics Sample



Fall Semester 2022 Meeting Schedule

August	
August 12	9:30 AM Welcome Back Professional Development Day & Lunch at Dining Commons
August 17	4 PM, Convocation, Venetian Gardens
August 31	Mandatory Title IX training, all employees

September	
September 7	2-2:50 PM, Department Meetings
September 12	2 PM, MANIC Monday (Mentoring & Networking in Collaboration)
September 14	2-2:50 PM, Committee Meetings
September 21	2-2:50 PM President's Community Forum
September 28	2-2:50 PM, Professional Development

October	
October 5	2-2:50 PM, Faculty Meeting Beacon Hall 107-108
October 7-9	Parents' Weekend
October 19	2-2:50 PM, Department Meetings
October 26	2-2:50 PM, President's Community Forum
October 31	2 PM, Manic Monday (Mentoring & Networking in Collaboration)

November	
November 2	2-2:50 PM, Committee Meetings
November 9	2-2:50 PM, Faculty Meeting
November 16	2-2:50 PM, Professional Development
November 30	2-2:50 PM, Committee Meetings

Mondays 2 PM, New Employee Training – Beacon Hall 107-108

Appendix N: Transcribed Individual Interview Data Sample

Austin: What do you think [Alpha] does the best?

bfc557f-3a9b-44e0-89de-61a79fc0d4af/491-0

00:04:16.641 --> 00:04:17.851

Gino: Oh, another big question.

bfc557f-3a9b-44e0-89de-61a79fc0d4af/496-0

00:04:18.901 --> 00:04:20.141

I again, I think that.

bfc557f-3a9b-44e0-89de-61a79fc0d4af/521-0

00:04:20.921 --> 00:04:24.818

What we do the best is work with

Codes- Themes: Academic Support, Attitude | Love Enfranchisement, Individualized, peer relationships Perception, Support Services

the students at other colleges

bfc557f-3a9b-44e0-89de-61a79fc0d4af/521-1

00:04:24.818 --> 00:04:28.471

that have been at working with students that are different.

bfc557f-3a9b-44e0-89de-61a79fc0d4af/546-0

00:04:29.531 --> 00:04:33.615

You know you had this list of changes that you could make to

bfc557f-3a9b-44e0-89de-61a79fc0d4af/546-1

00:04:33.615 --> 00:04:37.699

your class, and our attitude here is we do whatever it takes

Codes- Themes: Academic, Support Attitude | Love, Enfranchisement, Individualized, Knowledge, Life Skills, Mental Health, peer relationships, Perception, Self-Reflection, Support Services

bfc557f-3a9b-44e0-89de-61a79fc0d4af/546-2

00:04:37.699 --> 00:04:38.771

for the student.

Appendix O: Example of Professional Development PowerPoint

ASD Symptoms and Behavioral Differences:

Stimming
Rigidity
Echolalia
Gait

ASD Functional Differences:

Lack of social skills
Inability to read nonverbal communication, NVC
 both of others and their own
 doesn't automatically adopt social norms
Lack of reciprocity
Lack of Theory of Mind: "mind blind"; doesn't
automatically understand that others have different
thoughts, feelings, and beliefs

Best Practices:

Communicating-
Be concrete and specific Avoid using vague terms
like later, maybe, "why did you do that?"
Use less words
Slow down the pace
If necessary for understanding, break tasks down into
steps
Use gestures, modeling, and demonstrations with
verbalization
Provide accurate, prior information about change &
expectations
Specifically engage attention visually, verbally, or
physically
Avoid idioms, double meanings, and sarcasm
Pause, listen, and wait
Model correct format without correction
Encourage input and choice when possible

Teaching Techniques:

Social Supports

Protect the individual from bullying and teasing

Praise other residents when they treat the student with compassion

Create cooperative learning situations where the individual can share his/her proficiencies

Specific teaching, rehearsal, modeling and practice in natural settings--VERY IMPORTANT

Teach the “hidden curriculum” of your campus
