Transformative Education for Autistic Students: Sustainable Employment Readiness Training for Autistic Students

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Higher Education Policy and Student Affairs

THESIS

TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION FOR AUTISTIC STUDENTS:

SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT READINESS PROGRAM FOR

AUTISTIC STUDENTS

MaryEllen Thompson Stephens

May 2020
Transformative Education for Autistic Students: Sustainable Employment Readiness

Program for Autistic Students

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of Education Foundations and Policy Studies

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

By

MaryEllen Thompson Stephens

May 2020

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Dedication

This master’s thesis is dedicated to my loving husband, Abe, and daughters, Rese, Devon, Abby, and Gabby. Without your sacrifice and love, this journey would never have been possible. To my mother, Margaret Fortescue Thompson, and sister, Donna T. Frank, who have always pushed me to be the best version of myself, thank you for believing in me!
Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support that I received from Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri, Dr. Jackie Hodes, Abe, and Rese. You have been the backbone and guiding light of my journey. Your guidance and knowledge have been inspirational to me throughout this program. I will never forget your dedication to helping me succeed.
Abstract

Higher education institutions are in the business of transforming neurotypical students into becoming fully human and flourishing into employable graduates that contribute to societal development while failing to be fully inclusive of the needs of students on the autism spectrum. To address these concerns, I propose a developmental employment readiness program for matriculated autistic students. The *Autism Workforce Program* will transform the system of higher education to be more inclusive of the needs of the autism population and their growing unemployment rate. This program will provide employment training opportunities, job shadowing, internships, and paid positions through campus mentorships from faculty and staff on campus. I also propose formative assessments using direct and indirect measures to determine the effectiveness of this program to help build a more inclusive training program that will provide sustainable employment opportunities for autistic students. It is our ethical responsibility as an institute of higher education to transform the education system and allow neurodiverse students to develop their own potentialities.

*Keywords:* Neurodiverse, Autism, DisCrit
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Chapter 1

As a professional in the field of higher education, I seek to empower the autistic population with the skills necessary to secure a job after college. I chose to specifically focus on autistic students because current statistics offered by the CDC show that autistic people have less than a 10% chance of employment after graduating from college. (CDC, 2018). That means that 90% of the autistic students who graduate from college will not find a job after graduation. Students with autism that are attending college earned their degree having to pass all of the same rigorous admission standards and completing the same academic rigors as their neurotypical peers yet they are finding themselves unemployed and impoverished (CDC, 2018). Finding a job after college can be impossible for autistic students without support services in the areas of executive functioning, independent living, communication and employment readiness skills. Differently-abled people can make great contributions to society and deserve the opportunity to have a career and future.

My decision to move from a special education advocate focused on the K-12 arena into one focused on higher education was inspired by my brother, Billy. Billy had autism and committed suicide. He took his life after he could not find a job to support himself. He did not know that there were other opportunities that could help him to succeed. The information that could have helped him was never shared with him or with those supporting him. Our family was never informed that there were options for people with autism to attend college. Based on his life experience and ultimate sacrifice, I feel ethically and morally obligated to make this information available to broader society, with particular focus on the autistic
population and their families. I want to ensure that autistic people have an equal opportunity to higher education in an inclusive environment.

This chapter begins with my own personal story of hearing about my brother’s suicide. It continues with a flashback to who he was, all his many talents, and his lost potential. This leads into a description of my life’s mission to inform and educate autistic students, their families, or institutions of higher education about the potential of students with autism spectrum disorder.

**My Mission to Serve the Autistic Population**

The day my life’s mission changed forever is burned into my memory like an old familiar song. The grainy images of a brilliant life cut short are ingrained in my mind while I question societal obligations and growing statistics that glean insight into a very different path. The path that I will travel with you brings me back to a hot and sticky day in June. This day began just like any other and I had just placed my one-year old down for a nap when my phone rang. “Hi, Dad!” “Billy Dad”, my Dad said. “What, Dad? I did not understand what you said.” The silence that was between us became haunting as the gasping from the other end of the phone was an inaudible moan. “Daddy! Should I call an ambulance? Are you sick? Where is Mom?” My father, who was the strongest man I have ever met, wept quietly into the phone. I spoke gently and slowly as I said, “Is Mom dead?” After what felt like a lifetime, he finally said, “Billy is dead.”

Billy’s life flashed before my eyes as tears ran down my face and burned my skin. To me, my brother, Billy, was talented and “special.” I never saw his autism as anything but a gift. He was a musical and mechanical savant. He taught himself to play the guitar by ear. His claim to fame was learning “Free Bird” on his electric guitar. The last rift still rings in
my ears and brings me to tears as I recall his precision. His talent for music was as exceptional as his ability for mechanics. Billy could take apart an engine and put it back together before the age of twelve. Billy struggled socially through school but was otherwise a very good student. His teachers pushed him through the system with little understanding of his potential. They would smile politely and say “Good job!” like he was a small child, never recognizing his intelligence, but only seeing his difference. Not one single educator in all of his twelve years of education ever considered the possibility that he deserved an opportunity to advance his life. The people that were in place to help him discover his future looked no farther than the local grocery store, and a career as a cart person, when they envisioned his future life and career. Certainly, college was not even on their radar for Billy, even though he had talents and gifts that should have been recognized and could have been further developed and amplified through higher education. His guidance counselor ignored his SAT scores, engineering capabilities, and mathematical genius, instead seeing his disability as a lack of intellectual ability.

The misguided education system, informed by U.S. society’s overall lack of understanding about neurotypical diversity, simply ignored Billy’s potential. They sentenced him to the mediocrity of shopping cart detail until fate stepped in to reveal his mechanical prowess. One day at work, in that selfsame parking lot where Billy worked as a cart person, he heard a car that was not starting. He knocked on the person’s window and offered to fix the choke. Little did he know that the car was being driven by the owner of a mechanic shop who was shocked that Billy could tell what the problem was just by the sound the car was making! This elderly shop owner looked past the disability and immediately offered him a job to train as an auto mechanic.
The feeling of belonging and accomplishment that this form of employment offered to my brother lasted over ten years as Billy thrived in his role as an auto mechanic. He also thrived in his roles as husband and father. His life and success were tied to the unexpected opportunity and generosity of a single person. Sadly, after some years, the owner of the mechanic shop passed away unexpectedly, leaving Billy without a job. Billy searched for a new job and became desperate after being turned down for multiple positions. His social and communication skills impeded his ability to impress potential employers during job interviews. He struggled with eye contact, and he would offer indirect answers, with abstract language, in response to the direct questions posed in interviews. Over time, Billy lost the familiar routine and structure that had once filled him with peace. His desperation to provide for his family lead to anxiety and his fear of poverty eventually lead to suicide.

**Honoring the Memory of a Life Cut Short**

From the fateful day in June, my mind ruminates on lost opportunities and “what if” scenarios. These possibilities plague my very existence. I cannot help but wonder if the grave outcome would have been different if Billy was offered a different path. I vacillate between feelings of desperation and obligation to inform educators and the autistic population that the narrow-minded view of neurodiversity as an obstacle, instead of an opportunity, needs to be abolished. I watch the number of individuals diagnosed with autism grow at an alarming rate with a deep panic inside. My fear of the single narrative that affected Billy’s life that differently abled people can only work menial level jobs and make “handicapped” contributions to the functioning of larger society. Inclusion at a higher level to include the opportunity to attend college and make larger, dynamic contributions to the greater good for society is often diminished by the misunderstood notion that autism is a disease that needs to
be cured. The gross injustice that misinforms families that people with autism cannot succeed in higher education must be challenged. I took my own fears and transformed them into a life mission to support and educate the ever-growing autistic population into the realm of higher education and career development. I honor my dear brother’s memory by helping to transform the education system socially and academically through my advocacy work for our neurodiverse brothers and sisters across all strata of larger society.

**Ethical Obligations to Support Autistic Students**

Social transformation does not happen overnight. It begins with the knowledge that college remains the greatest driver of socioeconomic mobility in the United States. We have an ethical obligation as a society to stop the dominate, oppressive narrative that people that have autism are somehow less capable than their neurotypical peers. This narrative has pigeon holed an entire community of differently-abled people into believing that their lives are to be spent with menial, low-level jobs. In supporting neurodiverse learners, specifically autistic people, we can educate others about the potentiality of autistic people without limits and labels holding back their ontological vocations and potentiality.

People with disabilities “are constantly told by the dominant culture what they cannot do and what their place in society is” (Charlton, 2006, p.255). Many people with disabilities internalize this form of oppression and “come to believe they are less capable than other” (Charlton, 2006, p.220). People with disabilities often experience “systematic institutional victimization from all aspects of society” (Gibson, 2006, p.7). The fact that an individual has a disability does not define who they are as a person (Gibson, 2006). Higher education professionals are tasked with the creation of a counternarrative that takes seriously the accomplishments of marginalized groups. We must create a space for the emergence of
neurodiversity to be thought of as a differently abled person not as a person that lacks ability to perform. This will be accomplished by identifying and eliminating the barriers observed in matriculated college students with autism through sensitivity training to faculty and staff who will serve as mentors and provide employment readiness training to students while educating the campus on the value and necessity of inclusion.

We have an ethical obligation to change the narrow view that people with autism are incapable of being contributing members of society and recognize the growing autistic population’s potential positive impact on society. Many students with autism have the capability to go into science, technology, engineering, and mathematics courses, and are assets to the technology-driven economy. Great contributions in science have been made by people with autism like Bill Gates who is the co-founder of the Microsoft Corporation, and great inventors like Albert Einstein and Nikola Tesla. We must never undervalue a person because of societies belief of what a person can or cannot do.

Current and Future Impact of Autism on Higher Education

In order to establish a campus that is inclusive for all students, we must recognize the growing needs and potential of students that have autism. According to the Center for Disease Control, 1 in 59 individuals are diagnosed with ASD. By the year 2024, an estimated 200,000 teenagers with autism will be aging out of the protection of IDEA under the K-12 education system (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). IDEA 97’ constitutes the services provided under the Federal Individuals with Disabilities Act. As classified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disorder that affects communication and behavior. Autism is known as a “spectrum” disorder because there is wide variation in the
type and severity of symptoms people may experience (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). ASD occurs in all genders, ethnic, racial, and economic groups throughout the world (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Of the estimated 200,000 teenagers on the spectrum, 44% have an IQ in the average to above average range (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This is a significant number of students that will be searching for the pursuit of higher learning.

Having an inclusive mission that supports autistic students will impact the future of higher education. We must celebrate our difference and similarities and promote inclusivity in the student body, faculty and staff. This will allow us to provide equality and equity in all aspects of education cultivating and supporting the ontological vocation of every student. Transforming institutional culture and providing for the emergence of learning as a human right for all people.

**Future Practice Possibilities**

My main focus will be to provide sensitivity training to faculty and staff to create an inclusive campus. By raising awareness for the need to learn to accept autism as a different ability instead of the negative connotation that comes with the term “disabled” is essential to broaden the view of what is possible. This awareness can be achieved by providing training opportunities to all members of the campus more specifically, faculty and staff who will serve as mentors for students with autism. This training will help deconstruct the single narrative perspective and encourage future possibilities for students with autism in an inclusive and equalizing campus.

My second mission is to build an employment readiness program between students with autism and the faculty in staff in various departments. The faculty or staff members will
serve as mentors to provide hands on employment readiness training to autistic students. This will universities to focus on the direct needs of autistic students and support them on multiple levels of ability through mentors that are trained to be sensitive to their needs and have been trained to communicate effectively.

It is our ethical responsibility to support autistic students who have been historically marginalized while equalizing their opportunities in the job market. This begins by removing all discriminatory barriers for autistic students and adopting an inclusive institution that recognizes the potential of all students. Although this is not something that can be accomplished overnight, college remains the greatest driver of socioeconomic mobility in our country. Providing sustainable employment readiness and potential employment opportunities to the autistic population may have a ripple effect in society and higher education thereby shrinking the unemployment gap for autistic people. This will also equalize the potential outcomes for every student that is admitted into the university who deserves access to a high-quality degrees and employment potential. Reorienting the mission of an institution will cultivate the mindset that all identities are treated with equal respect and inclusion and social justice is vital for inclusive excellence and the success of all students.

**Preview of the Thesis**

This thesis investigates the impact of an employment readiness program specifically designed for students with autism. I will review the historical context and theoretical framework of inclusion in higher education and how it effects the future of students with autism after graduation. First, I will review my philosophical positionality that all humans are not objects but individuals with an ontological vocation regardless of a label that seeks to limit a person’s ability. This positionality deconstructs the master narrative in society that
people with autism are not capable of entering into meaningful, impactful careers after college. I will also provide a platforms for creating a more inclusive campus through sensitivity training to faculty and staff and employment training for Autistic students on campus.

Second, I will address the educational experience of autistic students as historically marginalized populations. Third, I will review the role of student affairs professional, with respect to the autism population, which has the potential to affect the educative experience of this population. This will be followed by historical research into the past and current trends of employment for Autistic people.

Finally, I will discuss how my internship in a career development program specifically designed for students with autism supported my theory that we must identify and eliminate the barriers to sustainable employment for this growing population. More specifically, I will discuss my intervention that offers employment readiness training to Autistic students through campus partnerships to provide shadowing, internships, and job training for Autistic student to support sustainable employment after graduation.
Chapter 2

In this chapter, I will articulate my conceptual framework for this thesis which critical action research can be used to enact social change for students with autism. Second, I will provide definitions from literature and my own definitions for terminology that I use throughout this thesis. Finally, I will describe the impact that I believe my intervention will have on the higher education system. For a fuller expression of all my experiences that have shaped my concern and formed my vision for transforming higher education for neurodiverse students, see Chapter One.

**Critical Action Research and Social Change**

One of the main purposes of critical action research is to reduce inequalities in our society. Taking a critical perspective, this thesis strives to give a voice to autistic students while equalizing their opportunities after graduation through employment readiness on an inclusive college campus. I will use action research to allow myself to take on a duel role of researcher as well as an active role as implementer of the *Autism Workforce Program* for this thesis.

Through action research I hope to enact social change in higher education with the inclusion of autistic students through an employment readiness programs to raise consciousness of ethical responsibility through effective solutions and an ongoing collaborative process of teaching and learning about the autistic population. Carson (1990) asserts that “the process of critical action research is collaborative and follows a cycle consisting of moments of reflection, planning, acting, observing, reflecting, preplanning, etc.” and “aims at the transformation of practices and understandings of the situations where the participants work” (p. 168). Through this cycle of critical action research, I will provide
observations and reflections to help to enact social change in the area of employment opportunities for autistic students after graduation.

The Lewin action research model involves a seven-step process. These seven steps, which become an endless cycle for the inquiring teacher, are the following:

1. Selecting a focus
2. Clarifying theories
3. Identifying research questions
4. Collecting data
5. Analyzing data
6. Reporting results

Research shows that extensive training regarding sensitivity to neurodiverse students will assist these students on the path to success while developing a healthy disability identity. Olkin (2018) asserts that education professionals tend to assist individuals with disabilities to overcome their disability which can minimize their disabilities awareness. Collective changes need to be implemented into aspects of the college and university to enact sensitivity training and inclusion, with full acceptance of a student’s identity as being autistic.

There is currently insufficient research to develop best practices in higher education as it relates directly to students with autism. My research aims to help to provide critical data to implement career readiness programs for autistic students on campus to support sustainable employment after graduation.
**Definition of Terms**

Below is a list of terminology that I use throughout this thesis. It includes both keywords that are relevant to the study of students with autism as well as key ideas from philosophers of education. The following is a list of definitions on my topic:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)</td>
<td>As classified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disorder that affects communication and behavior. Autism is known as a “spectrum” disorder because there is wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms people experience. ASD occurs in all ethnic, racial, and economic groups. Synonym: Autistic, ASD, Autism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banking Education</td>
<td>This is a key concept coined by Freire wherein “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider knowing nothing” (Freire, 1973, p. 72). In other words, the student is treated like a bank wherein the teacher deposits knowledge, and the student is expected to retrieve this knowledge at a later time. Students are the vessel and the teacher is the depositor of the knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domination</td>
<td>“Education is the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (Freire, 1973, p.72). Education as a form of domination has the ability to control the social narratives as well as establishing a system of racism and injustice for marginalized populations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential Education</td>
<td>This was a key concept across the writing of U.S. philosopher John Dewey. He argued that “experiences may be so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another” (Dewey, 1938, p. 61). Students will learn through their reflections on their experiences. This experiential learning is not necessarily what was created rather the process itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactionism</td>
<td>“Interpreting an experience in its educational function and force” (Dewey, 1938, p. 70). Interactionism is an example of how people shape society through their own interactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersectionality</td>
<td>“Intersectionality is an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power. Originally articulated on behalf of black women, the term</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

brought to light the invisibility of many constituents within groups that claim them as members but often fail to represent them.” (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 99). People have intersecting identities based on their political, gender, social identities that can be used as modes of discrimination.

| Miseducation | “Any experience is miseducative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 61). A student is seen as an object through miseducation not a person with unique abilities and thoughts. |
| Neurodiverse | The diversity of human brains and minds – the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species. (Beutel et al., 2018). Neurodiverse people identify with having developmental or intellectual disabilities, ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia. In this paper I use neurodiverse/neurodiversity synonymously with autism. |
| Neurotypical | Having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal” (Beutel et al., 2018). The term neurotypical is used in this thesis to describe a person that does not identify with having developmental or intellectual disabilities. |
| Oppression | “Indeed, the interest of the oppressors lie in changing the conscience of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them” (Freire, 1973, p. 74). Oppression is directly related to my definition of domination as it refers to educators taking control of the knowledge that is shared from teacher to student. Students do not have control over the narrative that the teacher presents or the impact that it may have on society. |
| Pedagogy | Pedagogy is the practice or method of teaching a subject. Pedagogy in this thesis represents the way a teacher effects a student through teaching style with influence over the social and political climate in the classroom. |
| Racism | Prejudice or discrimination against another person or group based on the idea that you are superior to them. In this thesis the word racism represents how people are ‘racist” against neurodiverse students based on the idea that they are inferior to them because of the perceived differences. |

**ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies**

Following the ACPA & NASPA competencies of Social Justice and Inclusion, I aimed to align this competency with research, practice, and a commonly utilized definition of social justice as “a process and a goal” where the goal is “full and equal participation of all
groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (Bell, 2010, p. 21). The future of Autistic students could be shaped through the *Autism Workforce Program* to mutually benefit both student and mentor while providing equitable learning environments for students with autism spectrum disorder.

The Interventions and Long-Term Impact of Professional Competencies will be Measured through defining roles and written evaluations by the mentors at the end of each semester. The proposed training will lead to the ACPA/NASPA learning outcome of each professional effectively explaining their role in at least three ways to support an autistic students in career development. This practice will transform the educational experience of the autistic students by strengthening the faculty/staff’s understanding of the student’s abilities while actualizing their professional role as a mentor to support future employment goals. By systematically working through their role in inclusion for people with autism, new possibilities emerge actualizing the vision of inclusion and developing a new systematic framework that is rooted in the abilities of students with autism.
Chapter 3

In this chapter, I will review my philosophy of education that supports education for all people as a human right. Second, I will address the positive and negative educational experiences as they relate to my philosophy of education. I will then discuss my thematic concern that students with autism will not be supported to reach their ontological vocations. Fourth, I will review the history of higher education, the role of student affairs, and the current state of disability and inclusion. Next, I will review the state and federal laws that apply to disabilities, policy development in higher education, and advocacy needs of autistic students. Finally, I will introduce how my internship informed and expanded my perspective on the growing need to identify and eliminate the barriers observed in college students with autism, more specifically, on the need for employment readiness training through campus partnerships that provide job training to autistic students.

My Philosophy of Education

In this section, I will review my philosophy of education. This entails my perspective of a positive and negative educational experience and my thematic concern as they relate to my philosophy of education. Education to me is a fundamental human right. Like oxygen to life, so is knowledge to growth. Without oxygen, a person will die and fade away into the abyss. To me, without knowledge you are doomed to an existence that is fruitless. The tree of knowledge feeds the soul and allows a human to move beyond the perception of what is visible into the reality of what could be based on subjects such as science, technology, math, and literature. Who are we, as a society, to deem who is worthy of obtaining knowledge? This beautiful gift of knowledge has been horded by people because of the value that they put on the right to learn and who should be permitted to learn. I believe that all humans deserve
an opportunity to learn and discover their greatest potential regardless of their socio-economic status, race, religion, gender orientation or perceived abilities, as a human right. Like the air we breathe so should knowledge invade our bodies and fill it with the oxygen of knowledge to benefit all of humanity with our talents and potentiality that can be discovered through learning.

Learning and gaining knowledge must be equalized in the education system. This balance can ignite a ripple effect into humanity as we encourage all people to learn and discover their own potentiality and employment opportunities. Through this open path of knowledge for everyone, we can build on Paula Freire’s ontological vocation that all humans/learners have an innate vocation and desire to fully develop and become fully human (Freire, 1973, p. 79). All learners must include people that are often underestimated because of a label that tells society that their disability is an inability to be and to flourish into their best possible future through a sustainable career. Therefore, I have dedicated almost 20 years to serving an underserved population of autistic student's that are underestimated for their abilities to make major contributions to society and the workforce. Some of the greatest mind's in my lifetime are people that identify with having autism and they have changed the face of technology, science, and literature because they were given the opportunity to learn and build rewarding careers. When given the opportunity to pursue knowledge, we must never limit a student based on assumed abilities. Open the doors to education wide and see what our students can teach us through their freedom to learn and build knowledge without the constraints of “who has earned the right to learn” and “who do we believe would be most successful.” Let the roots of knowledge grow deeply within every person that has a desire to
learn. We must allow every individual the right to discover who and what they would like to and become their greatest self, without arbitrary limitations.

My philosophy applies to neurodiverse thinkers and the duty I feel to help them to develop into their own best self and equalize their education and futures without limitations. Building knowledge while instilling a feeling of accomplishment through employment readiness and building connection on campus will support autistic students to fulfill their ontological vocation for the greatest good of society.

**A Positive Educational Experience**

A positive educational experience would allow for students to develop their own thoughts through actively participating in the development of knowledge. Students of all abilities would have the opportunity to achieve their own potential using best practice and research-based techniques to support healthy mental and academic development. Seligman (2015) asserts that “positive education is the combination of traditional education principles with the study of happiness and wellbeing” (Norrish & Seligman, 2015). Intervention based education systems can be a powerful tool that increases achievement and both the emotional and psychological wellbeing of students. Waters (2014) believed this to be true in the statement “A school curriculum that incorporates wellbeing will ideally prevent depression, increase life satisfaction, encourage social responsibility, promote creativity, foster learning, and even enhance academic achievement” (Waters, 2014). In supporting the whole student emotionally as well as academically we can provide a positive educational experience that is balanced in approach and allows for teachers to facilitate learning while building emotional support and cooperative learning strategies.
Positive educational experience takes into consideration the need for accommodations for autistic students through which they will have an equal opportunity to benefit from the education process. Autistic students that have been accepted to a university have met all academic criteria for the program that they have entered and will have earned their degree just like their peers. As stated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1991), “Accommodations do not lower academic standards or compromise the integrity of an academic program. Academic, conduct and technical standards will always be maintained” (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-336, § 2, 104 Stat. 328, 1991). The purpose of the ADA is to integrate people with disabilities into the classroom and society. This integration will prepare neurotypical students to form cooperative relationships with neurodiverse students and vice versa. It will also prepare people with disabilities for the challenges that they may face in life. The goal of a college student, with and without disabilities, is to prepare them to succeed in the workplace and the world. Learning to work together and not to pity or fear a person because of their disability and create a positive educational experience for all students.

**Negative Educational Experience**

A negative educational experience can hinder the future of students by limiting their knowledge and allowing the educator to control all information thereby controlling their futures. Through a negative educational experience, students are depicted as vessels to be filled with thoughts from their teachers without the opportunity to develop their own processes or thought patterns. This negative classroom experience relies on a single source of information presented in a single format of lecture to control all information that is received by the students. Through lecture and teacher dominance, students who have a different way
of learning and cannot learn through the lecture format will be left out of the classroom
dynamics. Failure to learn and thrive in such a classroom will continue without support and
accommodations for students who have different abilities. This negative educational
experience segregates and marginalizes students that have learning differences and labels
these students for not being “normal” and fitting into their academic box. This creates a
barrier to equal access and equal opportunity that will inhibit the student from learning.
Many students have disabilities that are not visible and the need for accommodations will not
be apparent to others. We must proactively establish an accessible classroom and campus
experience to reduce barriers that prevent students from fully participating to change the
negative educational experiences.

Connection to My Thematic Concern

My thematic concern is that students with autism will not be supported in higher
education to fulfil their ontological vocation. I view a student’s ontological vocation as the
ability to obtain sustainable employment after graduating from college. I believe that all
students should be provided with an opportunity through learning to become the greatest
version of themselves. This learning opportunity will include building critical thinking skills,
ethical reasoning, and team work to connect students to their future employment. The
purpose of a college education is to build the skills for students to be employable adults.
After having gained applicable knowledge in each area of study, student should be ready to
help create a better community and society. However, some students are not receiving this
opportunity because they are labeled as “disabled” and leave college without the training to
obtain employment after graduation.
Research performed by MarketWatch in 2019 suggests that there will be “500,000 adults on the autism spectrum aging into adulthood over the next 10 years. Yet, 85% of college graduates that have autism are unemployed, compared to the national unemployment rate of 4.5%” (Pesce, 2019). These statistics support my thematic concern that it is critical to the autism population that we develop employment readiness programs to support their ontological vocations. Every student deserves access through reasonable accommodations, a high-quality degree, and employment that will allow them to put their talents to work for the greater good of humanity.

**History of Higher Education**

The history of higher education began with the what we now refer to as Ivy League schools during the Colonial Era, from 1636 to 1789 (Cohen, 2010). This era created institutions that were religiously affiliated and had a primary purpose of educating men for the religious life. The first college was Harvard in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which was founded in 1636 and affiliated with the Puritan religion. The next college was founded in 1693 for the Anglican Church and was called, William and Mary (Cohen, p. 22). In 1701, the Congregational Ministers and 10 clergymen founded Yale College. (Cohen, p. 45). In 1740, the College of Philadelphia later called the University of Pennsylvania was founded as a Nonsectarian-affiliated college (Cohen, p. 25). In 1746, the College of New Jersey, later called Princeton, was founded by Presbyterian affiliation (Cohen, p. 25). As noted, the first colleges were all founded by various religious sects that held the mission of evangelizing and educating men to enter the religious life. This dominant religious education push was shifted in 1749 when Benjamin Franklin changed the mission of higher education by creating an
After the shift from universities as institutions for clergy only, colleges were then serving the interests of elites to include rich, white, men in liberal arts. With the industrial revolution, Europe and other countries proposed the idea that the United States needed degrees outside of the liberal arts and ministerial education (Smith, 2013). By the 20th century, there was an increase in educational as an investment with the development of required training programs for specialty fields. After World War 2, the GI Bill expand entrance into colleges and universities to those returning from active service as well as their families. Today, approximately 66% of high school students enroll in college between the ages of 18-24 (Smith, 2013).

The Role of Student Affairs in Higher Education

The role of student affairs is critical to the success of a university as it creates a community that is focused on the “whole” student to include both academics and personal development. Dr. Patrick Love, an associate professor from New York University, describes student affairs as follows:

At its broadest definition, student affairs could be said to consist of any advising, counseling, management, or administrative function at a college or university that exists outside the classroom ... Student affair professionals perform a varied mixture of leading, educating, individual and group advising, counseling, supervising, teaching, training, planning, program development, inquiring, managing, financial management, and assessment and evaluation. Emerging functions include resource
attraction and grant writing, entrepreneurship, outcomes assessment, political negotiation, and cultural assessment. (Love, 2003)

Student affairs professionals have a history of building a community of support for students at the university. This support is represented in multiple formats to include supporting students through various on campus activities and helping to build a community of engagement for students and faculty. The relationship between student affairs and academic affairs will help to build a sustainable community of support for students with mutual respect where ideas can be explored.

The role of student affairs professionals will continue to evolve with the expectations of higher disability enrollment at universities. This change in demographics should encourage them to be innovative and introduce more programming to meet the needs of the growing disability population on college campuses. Supporting legislation to access higher education and help shift the attitudes supporting equal rights for people with disabilities is also critical to supporting all student through their higher education journey.

Current State of Inclusion in Higher Education

The current state of inclusion in higher education has many factors to consider. I will expand on three of these factors to include the history of disability inclusion, the laws and policies of disability as they relate to education and employment, and the need for advocacy for autistic learners in higher education settings.

History of Disability and Inclusion in the United States

There is a long history of discrimination, segregation, and exclusion of disabled people in the United States. This discrimination excluded people with intellectual and developmental disabilities from receiving appropriate education, jobs, and housing (Patton et
al, 2016). The Constitution, federal laws, and state laws have been established to ensure basic legal, civil, and human rights to all citizens in our society regardless of their abilities. However, societal prejudices and the diversity of the needs of students identified with autism spectrum disorder may keep these students from being fully included in higher education and society (Patton et al, 2016).

**Disability Law in Education**

The history of special education legislation that effected higher education began April 9, 1965 when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, “establishing state-level programs to help disabled students facing challenges in schools” (McLaughlin, 1975, p. 74). Though there are some regulations in place in higher education already, there is not a “one size fits all” scenario with the autism population. The needs and disabilities of each student is unique, and each reasonable accommodation must be adopted based on the individual student needs.

Higher education accommodations are covered under Subpart E of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Titles II and III of the ADA. Lake (2011) explains that:

Section 504 of the rehabilitation act which applies to federally assisted programs prohibits discrimination in higher education for most purposes. The ADA provides slightly broader coverage in some circumstances, and the ADA Amendments Act also affects college student disability rights. (p. 232)

The ADA was created to protect disabled people from discrimination in the workplace and in higher education. The students are guaranteed equal opportunity, reasonable accommodations, and federal and state protection under the laws. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states that schools must provide students with reasonable
accommodations comparable to those provided to their peers. Any Institute of higher education that is found by the Office of Civil Rights to be out of compliance with these laws may lose its federal financing.

**Policy Development at Institutes of Higher Education**

Student affairs educators, practitioners, and institutions of higher education must continue to refine their policies and develop new ways to engage with autistic students. While complying with the ADA and Section 504 are required, I question if institutions are doing enough to provide safe and sensory-friendly spaces for autistic students to thrive inside the classroom. The syllabus policy at most universities requires professors to include the Students with Disabilities Statement to ensure that proper notification is provided to each student. I argue that the bigger issue is how can we refine the educator's role to ensure educational equality.

The challenges facing autistic students can be visible and invisible to faculty and staff, and create barriers to inclusion and an equitable learning environment. Through required training, faculty and staff should be educated about reasonable accommodations to recognize the potential challenges of matriculated autistic students. The goal of reasonable accommodations is to level the playing field so that students with disabilities can have equal access to the programs and activities offered in their college or university. Some examples of reasonable accommodations include: Extended time and a distraction-reduced environment for exams, assistive technology for note taking in class, availability of all PowerPoint slides in paper format before exams, extended time for assignments, excusal from oral presentations, and exemption or guidance through group work. College students with autism may need assistance learning advocacy skills required to ask for supports and
accommodations. By refining the educator's role to understand the needs of autistic students an equitable environment may be possible.

Moving from knowledge to action is essential when becoming more deeply aware of the crisis that faces autistic students. This training will assist in the equalization of employability after college graduation. Statistics show that the autistic students that do graduate college with a degree, or even an advanced degree, may never find a job. Compared to their peers with other types of disabilities, young adults with autism had the lowest rate of employment and may be forced to live below the poverty level. I believe that institutions of higher education have an obligation to ensure protection and equality for all learners to ensure their life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

**Internship Theory to Practice Narrative**

As a result of interning in an autism program for matriculated college students, I have become more deeply aware of the crisis that these students face in overcoming adversity. Autism is called a spectrum disorder because it effects each person differently. In getting to work with over 40 students over the course of two years, I have learned some of the elements of this spectrum that effect the everyday lives of my students. I have smiled and I have cried. I have been blown away with the wisdom of these young adults to articulate their needs, as they learned to self-advocate in all areas of their lives, to ensure a better future for themselves. The courage that I have seen them display to protect a fellow autistic student is heroic. They form a small of neurodiverse students that are paving the way for a better tomorrow through the study of physics, chemistry, computer science, history and more. I have learned to never underestimate the academic potential of my students and the determination that they must succeed.
In preparation for this thesis, I have enjoyed including my students in the journey. My students guided me to see their perspective through actively engaging and responding to my questions of right and wrong in how to advocate for them. Throughout this thesis, I have used the words “autistic, autism, and neurodiversity” to represent the labels that so often represent my students. For the purpose of supporting my students as I wrote this thesis, I had originally chosen to use a capital “A” as a political representation of respect for the labels they were given. However, after consulting with my students, they did not want attention drawn to any version of the word “autism” because it does not define them. I was instantly reminded that I take certain rights for granted and that there is still so much more that I need to learn in order to fully support students with autism.

This semester, I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in my philosophy class. The author, Paulo Freire, writes about the process through which an oppressed person learns about their oppression, a process he calls “conscientization.” I became conscious of the oppression that disabled people have been fighting their entire lives through this reading. It provided insight into my students and the role of higher education can play in helping disabled people. We can use college campuses to help educate others to be more conscience of the needs of the autistic population and see their potential to make great contributions to society.

In supporting the students with autism on my campus, I also discovered the shame that comes with failure. Failure not in the world of academia, but in the world that they enter after graduation. These students have completed their degrees and hope to enter a world of job opportunities with their newly acquired education skills. Sadly, they are met with a lack of sensitivity to their communication barriers and a feeling of shame and failure because they cannot find a job in their field of study. They are placed in remedial positions by the office of
vocational rehabilitation that finds them any position, not necessarily a position that they are qualified to work or want to work. The broken system places autistic people into manual labor jobs with the assumption that disabled people cannot make meaningful contributions to society even after they worked so hard in higher education and graduated.

The autistic students that do graduate college with a degree, or even an advanced degree, still struggle with their employability. Compared to their peers with other types of disabilities, young adults with autism have the lowest rate of employment. As a student affairs professional and society, we can help to equalize opportunities for all people. As an institution of higher education, we exist on the premise that education opens doors to employment and reduces the poverty level. We must continue the process of opening doors to a greater future through employment readiness programs for students with autism through campus partnerships. By developing programs like the Autism Workforce Program, that I outline in my programmatic intervention, we can provide vital training to students with autism to give them opportunities for employment after graduation. Our mission of inclusion can never be complete if we are not fully inclusive of helping all people to succeed. The Autism Workforce Program is designed specifically to create employment training to autistic students on campus by creating partnerships with faculty and staff to mentor students and help them to learn the skills necessary to obtain a job after graduation and opening the door to sustainable employment.

My thematic concern of social justice and inclusion are not "buzz" words that you hear in passing or casually gloss over during mandatory training workshops. Providing equitable learning environments and equal opportunities for students with Autism is ethically and legally our responsibility as student affairs professionals. My internship provided me
with a first-hand perspective into the lives of students with autism and the battle that they fight for equality of education, housing, and employment. Inclusion of all abilities should not have to be a law or policy but a natural progression of humanity and rights of all people to be accepted and celebrated for their abilities. Higher education is a small micro-cosmic reflection of what could be in the future and we have an opportunity to educate faculty, staff, students and society about the great potential of the autistic population through the *Autism Workforce Program*. 
Chapter 4

In this chapter, I will restate my purpose for creating the *Autism Workforce Program* to transform higher education for autistic students specifically addressing the values and best practice that influence the needs of students with autism. Second, I will review the theories of learning that informed my program development. Last, I will introduce a program, *Autism Workforce Program*, as a volunteer program for students with autism to partner with faculty and staff on campus in provide job training, shadowing, or internship opportunities to matriculated students with Autism. This program collaborates with the office of students with disabilities and the career development center to offer a volunteer career readiness program for students with autism on the college campus.

The program proposal begins with a required one-day training workshop for faculty and staff to receive training to be a mentor in the *Autism Workforce Program*. Students participating in the *Autism Workforce Program* will be provided with individual instruction teaching independence skills, self-advocacy, organization, stress management, and social skills by the office of student services with disabilities to ensure that the students are engaged and supported. Additional training and support to faculty and staff will be offered through weekly booster sessions and an opportunity to participate in weekly socials with the students enrolled in the *Autism Workforce Program*. This program has been influenced by my internship with autistic students and my philosophical positionality.

**Best Practice for Supporting College Students with Autism**

Currently, there are only a limited number of universities in the United States that offer specialized supports for matriculated students with autism. However, the 1 in 59 children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) will be arriving on college
campuses. Research shows that over half of these students will have average or above average intellectual ability and be searching for an institution of higher education (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018). The dramatically increasing numbers of students with autism entering higher education will affect how we support students, yet there is a lack of information available to direct us to an effective model of support. To address the scarcity of information, institutions of higher education struggle to create barrier-free environment for matriculated students with disabilities. In supporting these students, we must recognize them as unique individuals that are valued for their abilities, not disabilities. Through collaborative efforts, higher education professionals must facilitate the development initiatives to ensure that students with autism will have support on campus.

Given the statistical data that shows autism prevalence is increasing, there will be a growing number of students with autism matriculating into higher education. Colleges and universities are tasked with developing effective models that promote adapting their resources to improve supports for the autism population. The development of supports in the area of employment readiness are essential to increasing sustainable employment post-graduation for this marginalized population. Collaborative efforts campus wide will assist in the development of effective training models which informs our work in improving supportive resources for individuals with autism.

**Critical Action Research**

One of the main purposes of critical action research is to reduce inequalities in our society. Taking a critical perspective, this thesis strives to give a voice to the autism population that has been historically silenced. Through a continuous cycle of investigation and research my aim is to enact social change, reduce discrimination and raise consciousness
of ethical responsibility through effective solutions and an ongoing collaborative process of teaching and learning about the autism populations.

**Employment Training as an Intervention**

My program will create access to career readiness for neurodiverse students in partnership with the career development center and campus resources that will create access to employment training and build a professional campus that is sensitive to and trained to serve to neurodiverse students.

**Goals & Objectives**

1. Design a professional development series on campus that teaches faculty and staff how to be sensitive and serve autistic students in higher education.

2. Access to career readiness for neurodiverse students in partnership with the career development center and campus resources to create practical skills for employment.

3. Provide hands on experience to autistic students to learn job skills, in a real-world setting, to build a structure for sustainable employability.

4. Build a foundation of social and communication skills for autistic college students to gain employment skills that are crucial to securing a job after college.

**Learning Objectives for Supervisors**

1. Supervisors will be able to articulate their role in creating an inclusive training environment for students

2. Supervisors will be able to give examples of concrete language to effectively support the needs of students with autism.

3. Supervisors will be able to apply effective strategies for the development of clear expectations for each student's employment role.
4. Supervisors will create a plan of action that incorporates the needs of the autistic student as it relates to the employment role.

5. Supervisors will be able to apply focused feedback for measurable and observable behaviors for each autistic student employee.

**Learning Objectives for Students**

1. Students will develop a career plan that identifies occupations within their chosen industry and education requirements in collaboration with the *Autism Workforce Program* and career development center.

2. Students will work collaboratively with the *Autism Workforce Program* and career development center to connect with a trained supervisor in their appropriate work-based opportunities to include paid/unpaid internships, job shadowing and on-the-job training opportunities.

3. Students will be able to apply effective communication strategies for self-advocacy in the area of personal boundaries, use of concrete language, overstimulation, and breaks.

4. Students will apply effective executive functioning skills in the area of time management by being on time for training, asking for extended time to complete a task, and completing the required number of hours weekly not to exceed 10 hours.

**My Philosophy of Education**

My philosophy of education incorporates theories based on continuity, inclusion, and ontological vocation, as they apply to the students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. The pillar of continuity applies to my philosophy of education and the ASD population as it is essential to develop an educational foundation that sees a future for all students, not just the neurotypicals, to ensure equalized opportunities.
Providing an inclusive campus environment to all students regardless of perceived abilities must be recognized as an ethical responsibility to institutions of higher education. Inclusion without the presence of domination and oppression for this marginalized population is viewed through the ideological perspective that Paulo Freire asserted in his view of educational dominance. Based on Freire’s recognition of “Education is the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” (Freire, 1973 p.78). Students with autism are often oppressed; they often believe that they live “outside” society and the education system regardless of their ability to make great contributions to our society.

Having an inclusive mission that supports neurodiverse students will impact the future of higher education. We must celebrate our differences and similarities and promote inclusivity in the student body, faculty and staff. Paulo Freire (1973 p.78) asserts that dehumanization of human beings through the banking concept of education and other oppressive practices of inequality in the classroom transforms humans into objects. My intervention places emphasis on cooperative learning for each participant to equalize the learning process and challenge the relationship of teacher vs student, developing a mutual sense of purpose. This intervention will allow us to provide equality and equity in all aspects of education, cultivating and supporting the ontological vocation of every student. Transforming institutional culture and providing for the emergence of learning as a human right will structure a new process of liberation for historically marginalized students with Autism.

My educational philosophy informs my intervention by creating a counter narrative that takes seriously the accomplishments of marginalized groups by cultivating whole person
future-oriented experiences. My intervention aims to transform the oppressive structures in higher education and dissolve the perception of what is normal by building horizontal connections between knowledge and subject, community, and sustainable employment through a campus wide employment readiness program. It is our ethical responsibility as an institution of higher education to transform the education system by allowing Autistic students to develop their own potentialities.

Students with Autism are oppressed through multiple points of identity. We must create a counter narrative that takes seriously the accomplishments of marginalized groups and fight the epistemic suppression of the Autism population. We are not doomed to repeat past injustices when we deconstruct the “master narrative” and provide platforms for new epistemology from the perspective of the historically marginalized. We must deconstruct the society’s false notion of what student success looks like to create a space for the emergence of neurodiversity. This new reality will be accomplished by identifying and eliminating the employment barriers observed in matriculated college students with Autism.

Programmatic Intervention

The programmatic intervention that I am proposing is providing employment readiness training campus wide through a partnership with the office of student services with disabilities, the career development center and various departments on campus. This intervention will support Autistic students in their majors and provide professional development training to faculty and staff to ensure that students will be supported on campus. This programmatic intervention will integrate Autistic college students into the competitive job market while engaging and educating faculty and staff mentors to create an inclusive community. Initial training will be provided to supervisors in the form of a required training
session on campus by a designated employee. The training and support will continue in the form of weekly supervisor evaluations submitted electronically as well as verbal check-ins as needed to address concern resolution. Supervisors will be offered the opportunity to attend monthly booster sessions and weekly socials with Autistic students that are held in the Office of Student Services with Disabilities. This program will help to build continuity of expectations and continue building relationships and trust among all participants of the *Autism Workforce Program.*

The Office of Student Services with Disabilities requires all Autistic students that participate in the Autism Workforce Program to complete five hours of personal development training weekly. This training includes one hour of 1-1 skill development with graduate assistants in the areas of career readiness, social interaction, academic achievement, self-advocacy, and independent living. Students are also required to attend one group session with their peers, a social event, and two study hours in the Office of Student Services with Disabilities weekly to ensure the whole student is being supported.

*The Significance of Employment on Society*

This is an important topic to consider because college is still the greatest driver of socioeconomic mobility in America, but if the education system does not do more to keep it within reach for the ever-growing population of students classified with autism spectrum disorder, it could have the opposite effect--serving as a barrier instead of a resolution. Research has shown that there is one out of fifty-nine percent chance of a person being diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Furthermore, the department of labor and industry has released statistics that show 85% of college graduates with Autism are unemployed compared to the national unemployment rate of 4.5% (CDC, 2018). College
graduates that identify as having Autism have less than a 10% chance of employment after 6 years. This is an epidemic that needs to be addressed as the number of Autistic individuals looking for an institute of higher education will be approximately 200,000 students by the year 2024 (CDC, 2018).

Employment Training Program Organization

I have organized the program in this manner to ensure that faculty and staff are prepared to undertake the ever-growing, unique needs of autistic students. It is essential that faculty and staff are sensitive to Autism and can support the social and executive functioning needs for employment training. Autistic students that have been accepted to the university will be provided with a unique opportunity to receive employment readiness skills on the college campus in a safe and supportive environment. This employment readiness program is structured to allow autistic students to undertake the responsibilities of employment while building the social and communication skills necessary to be successful in a career after graduation. The real-world experience of having an internship, job, shadowing, or volunteer position will allow these students to develop the soft skills and hard skills necessary for competing in the job market after graduation.

Autism Workforce Program Proposal

My first goal is to inform and train our campus community to be sensitive to the unique strengths and potential needs of neurodiverse students. It is “next” practice to have the identity of neurological diversity join racial and cultural diversity as essential elements of diversity on campus. My program will offer a training opportunity at the start of each semester for students, faculty, staff to learn about neurodiversity and their essential role in Autism student success. This program is available to all interested members of the university
but must be completed to enroll as a supervisor in the Autism Workforce Program. All supervisors will be required to complete this training component before a student can be assigned to work with the supervisor.

My second goal is for Autistic students to be successful in the workforce. The program will provide matriculated Autistic students with training to develop and enhance their social skills and performance readiness skills through employment opportunities on campus. They will be offered employment readiness opportunities to include paid and unpaid positions, internships, and shadowing in offices and departments around campus. Under the direction of professionals that are trained to support neurodiversity, a platform will be constructed for students to work with/for faculty and staff in a neurodiverse-friendly environment. In partnership with the student's educational process, the professionals will support students and provide comprehensive career development training to empower them to pursue their postgraduate plans and navigate lifelong career goals.

This program will be run at the disability support office twice per semester to ensure that faculty and staff that are interested in training are offered the opportunity to attend as well as all Autistic Workforce partners. All supervisors are required to complete this training before a student will be assigned. This training serves as a requirement to ensure that all supervising partners are prepared for their role to assist Autistic students on site.

Each supervisor will be supported through the use of digital weekly evaluation reports, monthly booster sessions, and weekly socials to get to know the Autistic students on a more personal level and discover new ways to effectively communicate with the students.
Training Session Program Title: Autism Workforce Mentor Training

The program that I am proposing follows the NASPA and ACPA competency of social justice and inclusion. The goal of this program is to train the volunteer faculty and staff in their role as mentors in the Autism Workforce Program. The program will focus on the needs of autistic students the mentor's role as advocates and teachers for their student employees, shadowing, or intern students. The learning strategies that we will use are based on programs and trainings for staff and staff to promote and foster support for autistic students while they develop the necessary skills for employment after graduation. After training, each mentor will effectively be identifying their role as mentors for the and three ways to support autistic students in the areas of communication, self-advocacy, or executive functioning as they relate to the employment readiness.

Program Proposal

The Autism Workforce Mentor Workshop will be presented as a single day workshop for faculty and staff. This training program will be supported with weekly booster training to mentors and students provided by the office of the student's services with disabilities and weekly evaluations of students by mentors.

Workshop Schedule

1. Session 1: Introduction to the Autism Workforce Program and Mentoring –
   8:00am-9:30am, 90 minutes

   *Autism Workforce Program Overview Lecture & Power Point (Appendix A)*

   Welcome to the Autism Workforce Program. Young adults with disabilities face incredible barriers to successful self-development and employment. They will never reach their full potential as contributing members of society if they are denied access to
appropriate employment readiness skills. People with disabilities need positive role models like you to overcome barriers and become successful adults. You will be operating in a critical role as a mentor while raising awareness to the importance of mentoring college students with Autism.

_Potential Benefits of Mentoring for Youth with Disabilities (Autism Speaks.org)_

Every Autistic person will bring their own unique skillset and experience to a job. Some additional skills and abilities that you may benefit from when hiring a student with Autism:

1. Honesty
2. Different perspective
3. Excellent attention to detail
4. Strong technical skills
5. Methodical and logical
6. Identifying things that might be missed by others
7. Creative thinking
8. Problem solving
9. New skills and insights
10. Loyalty

**Common Questions:**

_Will this cost your department money to mentor by providing a job, internship, or shadowing experience to one of our Autistic students?_
The answer is no. The students that are enrolled in this program will qualify for certain paid and unpaid positions through the office of student services with disabilities and all hours will be documented through this department by a weekly confirmation email.

*How will we be partnered with a student's?*

You will be partnered with a student that is currently enrolled in your department’s major and exhibits strengths in knowledge of your departments needs and expectations.

*Autism and Transition in Higher Education Statistics*

According to the CDC, 1 in 68 individuals are affected by autism spectrum disorder or ASD. Over the next five years, an estimated 200,000 teenagers diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder will be aging out of the services provided under the federal Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA). As classified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disorder that affects communication and behavior. autism is known as a “spectrum” disorder because there is wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms people experience. ASD occurs in all ethnic, racial, and economic groups. Of the estimated 200,000 teenagers on the spectrum, a significant number of teens and young adults will be searching for an institute of higher learning.

College and other higher education facilities may be inadequate for students with autism and can be solved through transition planning, accommodations, and creating a sustainable environment in order to increase success during and after their time in higher education. In order to establish a campus that can sustainably transition students from higher education into future jobs, we must prepare the campus for our students. Transitioning into college and employment is a difficult change for students with ASD and requires
multiple services and active collaboration between faculty, staff, office of student services with disabilities, and the career development center.

Before going into higher education, services for students with ASD help guide them to meet their individual needs. These services do not need to be self-advocated. However, under the ADA, "students themselves, once of legal adult age, must disclose their disability, self-advocate, and provide necessary documentation regarding their disability" (White et al., 2017). Self-advocating and transition is challenging for many ASD students, for they are overwhelmed by the new living situation and disclosing their diagnosis. Intervention should happen early on, and there may be a higher demand socially than academically (Luey, 2014). It is necessary to develop resourcefulness and self-advocacy because these students will need to understand themselves as an individual. In higher education, students with ASD must be prepared to become more independent. Students with ASD have concerns with future challenges they may face when transitioning into a higher education or the workplace.

According to a study conducted by Blacher, Bolourian, and Zeedyk in 2018, these students are worried about sustaining motivation, time management, relationships, and how to successfully enter the workforce. Resources such as mentorships, internships, job shadowing, and job placement need to be more available and made known to these students.

**Benefits of Mentoring for Students**

There is evidence to suggest that mentoring people with disabilities can yield important outcomes. One study that appeared in the Journal of Rehabilitation’s January/March 1995 issue showed that Mentors in the study provided qualitative evidence that their mentees “(1) learned how to conquer disability-related barriers, (2) became more positive about their capabilities and future potential for independence, (3) expressed
increased interest in working, staying in college, and living in their own homes” (Powers et al., 1995, p.12). Based on Partners for Youth with Disabilities experience, some potential positive outcomes for mentees with disabilities (pyd.org).

1. Increased independent living skills
2. Improved motivation and self-esteem
3. Healthier relationships with family, friends, teachers, etc.
4. Increased involvement in community and extracurricular activities
5. Increased interest in continuing education and the knowledge of how to do so
6. Increased interest in having a job/career and the knowledge of how to do so
7. Increased disability pride
8. Increased knowledge of disability rights
9. Improved self-advocacy skills

**Overview of the Students Training/Role**

Each student that is participating in the *Autism Workforce Program* will also be trained. They will be required to complete five hours per week of a BASICS program. This program will be adapted from the BASICS College Curriculum presented by Rigler et al.(2016). For example, Rigler et al. states, “Our intention with the BASICS College Curriculum is that each text serves as a practical guide through the transitions experienced by young adults with autism. The new independence in young adulthood requires the development of self-advocacy and resourcefulness, in academics and socially” (Rigler et al., 2016). The BASICS College Curriculum is an example of a program preparing students with ASD for their future employment. By focusing on self-awareness and self-advocacy, the
program thoroughly trains students to be conscience of expectations and have the knowledge to self-advocate educational accommodations and employment situations.

15 minutes open question

2. Break 15 minutes - 9:30-9:45

3. Session 2: Your Role as Mentor/Supervisor– 9:45am-11:15am, 90 minutes

Understanding an autism diagnosis by describing common difficulties faced by people with autism at the university/job (adapted from the National Autistic Society Autism at Work, Autism.org)

1. Describe common strengths and characteristics of people with autism
2. Describe common stereotypes about people on the autism and how they can be challenged
3. Describe how you can create positive environments for your mentees.

How can you build effective communication with your Mentee?

1. Avoid abstract language, sarcasm and metaphors. Autistic students take language literally and the use of concrete language is essential for clear communication.
2. Identify some common factors that could negatively impact communication
3. Use visuals and social stories to help your mentee understand a task
4. Provide Predictability with written agendas and tasks to serve as reminders and help with routines

How to provide a sensory friendly environment for students

1. What are sensory needs and how may they affect your student?
2. Describe and discuss sensory overload and how people with autism can recover?
3. How can you as the Mentor recognize and respond to the sensory needs of your student?

Anxiety and Stress as it Relates to the Autism Population

1. How does Anxiety and stress impact a student with autism?
2. Describe how stress and anxiety impact a student with autism physically and mentally
3. How can you help to reduce the stress and anxiety of your mentees?

4. Break 11:15-11:30

3. Session 3: Campfire Session 11:30am-12:00pm, 30 minutes – Mentors will participate in a “Campfire Session” which is an interactive presenter lead discussion that allows attendees to share personal experience and focus on interactive learning through shared experiences.

4. Lunch – 12:00pm-1:00pm, 60 minutes

5. Session 4: Review Mentors Role – 1:00pm-2:00pm, 60 minutes (Adapted from NAS Student Mentor Guide Mowat et al, 2019).

1. Clarify job expectations and provide concrete examples. Explicit and concrete language must be used in reviewing the student’s job description. You will need to explain how you would like your students to interact with others in their role as well as the proper etiquette and unwritten rules of the workplace.

2. Provide appropriate training and monitoring of the student while they are on the job. Clear and structured training with written expectations will allow for clear communication. This will be provided hands on by the mentor to ensure a student is being guided by a trained professional. A mentor is expected to oversee the students' progress and work as needed.
3. Task instructions must be concise and specific. Provide your student with clear instructions right from the start about exactly how to carry out each task, from start to finish, as they are essential for continued progress. Do not assume the student will infer your meaning from informal instructions – for example, rather than saying 'Give everyone a copy of this', say 'Make three photocopies of this, and give one each to Steven, Aric, and Troy'. You can also provide written task instructions or have the student repeat the instructions back to you to ensure they are understood.

4. Structured work environment. Providing predictive environments will help build structure to a student’s workday is very helpful. You can help by working with them to prioritize activities, organizing tasks into a timetable for daily, weekly and monthly activities, and breaking larger tasks into small steps. This information about start and finish times, and help getting into a routine with breaks and lunches will be helpful in building executive functioning skills.

5. Weekly performance review delivered electronically to the office of student service with disabilities. A weekly performance review to share any concerns or wins for the student is required. It is a four-question email survey to report attendance, appearance, communication, and any concerns. The office of the student services with disabilities will have weekly one-to-one meetings with the student to discuss and review performance and give overall comments and suggestions.

6. Meet your student at agreed times and locations

7. Advise students by email/text of any unavoidable changes at least 24 hours in advance
8. Complete an end of the semester review with the office of student services with disabilities

9. Monthly booster meetings (approximately 45 minutes) will be provided by the office of student services with disabilities. These meetings are not mandatory but will give mentors the chance to debrief, brainstorm, share resources, receive support, and reflect on their work and the progress of their mentee(s).

10. Mentor-Mentee Relationship building. This relationship can be strengthened by attending the office of student services with disabilities Friday socials. Socials will be run by students with autism and they have an open-door policy for anyone to attend that would like to socialize to join them for an hour on Friday’s.

6. Student Panel: 2:00pm-3:00pm

The student panel will provide an opportunity mentee to discuss their own goals and perspective employment opportunities as well as a time for mentors to ask mentees questions and get to know the students. In the next chapter, I will review the role and characteristics of leadership in higher education. I will then discuss the legal obligations of inclusion in higher education. Next, I expand on how the Autism Workforce Program will be used to transform leadership roles in higher education, the assessments of the program, and limitations that I may face in implementing the program. Finally, I will discuss my future role in student affairs as a higher education professional.
Chapter 5

In this chapter, I will review the role of leadership in higher education. I will then review the characteristics of effective leadership as a student affairs professional as well as the legal obligations of inclusion, in the higher education setting. Next, I will expand the role of transformational leadership as it relates to the *Autism Workforce Program*. I will also provide assessments and evaluation for the program. Additionally, I will review the limitations of the program. Finally, I will explore my future role in student affairs as a higher education professional.

**Leadership in Higher Education**

The role of leadership for a student affairs professional is essential for the growth and development of our academic scholars. Leadership empowers student affairs professionals through the work they do with others to achieve common goals of equity and justice, in alignment with their institution’s mission. We inspire our students to achieve their greatest potential and help them to ignite change on campus and in society for the greater good. Pursuing changes and examining the status quo help us to effectively guide our students into the future. There are many resources about leadership to inspire student affairs professionals. For example, Kouzes and Posner (1987) says that, the expectation is that we are to be forward thinkers always searching for future trends and ways to serve our students. This is asserted in the statement “To look toward the future, you start by being mindful of the present. Stop, look, and listen to what is happening around you” (Kouzes and Posner, 1987).

Student affairs professionals look to the future by accepting the current challenges and working to develop curriculum and educational interventions to address these injustices and inequalities. Despite the inequality of support given to student affairs professionals as
compared to faculty, student affairs professionals must take a collaborative, non-authoritative approach in our leadership role. This means we must actively work with faculty building programs and activities outside the classroom. We must lead courageously with the ethical purpose of higher education at the forefront, while advocating for the success of all students.

**Characteristics of Effective Leadership**

In Higher Education and Student Affairs, an effective leader must be knowledgeable and ethical in their roles. A prevailing theory of leadership that describe “good leadership” in terms of ethical or moral leadership is offered by James Burns (1978). His theory of transformational leadership can impact others through engagement. This leadership model categorizes leader’s behavior into two categories: transformational and transactional (Burns, 1978). According to Burns (1978), transformational leadership occurs when leaders engage with followers in such a way that “leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (p. 74). In our role as leaders, we must raise awareness of the ethical obligation to support neurodiverse students in higher education and promote social change for the underserved autistic population through the Autism Workforce Program.

**Leadership and the Autism Workforce Program**

The role of leader will take on many forms in the Autism Workforce Program, including relational, social, transactional, and most important, collaborative leadership. Building relationships with our students and campus partners is essential for this program to be successful. Transformational leadership is about end-values to include “liberty, justice, equality” and a collective well-being for all people (Burns, 1978, p. 74). One goal of this leadership style is to have a relationship of mutual needs, aspirations and higher values that progress others into a more socially oriented value system through transformational and
transactional leadership. Through the *Autism Workforce Program*, faculty and staff will aid in the transformation of the current systems of higher education that provide little to no employment readiness programs for students with autism, thus providing an opportunity for a more inclusive and equitable future for this marginalized population.

The Social Change Model of Leadership (Wagner, 2015) approaches leadership as a value-based process that is a purposeful and collaborative process to enact positive social change. The focus of the *Autism Workforce Program* is to establish social and societal change and shift our perception of what is possible for students with autism. This population has been undervalued for far too long in our society. We have an ethical responsibility to provide possibilities and not limitations on the futures of autistic students and future graduates. The *Autism Workforce Program* will assist in building this social change through employment readiness skills that are critical to ensure that these students will have a better opportunity for sustainable employment after graduation.

The model that was used to build this program. The Social Change Model of Leadership is also referred to as the seven C’s for Change and an eighth C is a goal of positive social change (Astin & Astin, 1996).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Consciousness of Self</strong></th>
<th>Awareness of the beliefs, values, attitudes, and emotions that motivate a person to action by developing consciousness of others.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Congruence</strong></td>
<td>Thinking, feeling, and behaving with consistency, genuineness, authenticity, and honesty towards others; actions are consistent with most deeply held beliefs and convictions; interdependent with Consciousness of Self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Commitment</strong></td>
<td>The psychic energy that motivates the individual to serve and that drives the collective effort; implies passion, intensity, and duration, and is directed toward both the group activity as well as its intended outcomes; requires knowledge of self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td>To work with others in a common effort; constitutes the cornerstone value of the group leadership effort because it empowers self and others through trust; leadership as a group process; encourages group to transcend individual goals, interests and behaviors; vital that group members explore differences in individual values, ideas, affiliations, visions and identities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common Purpose</strong></td>
<td>To work with shared aims and values; facilitates the group’s ability to engage in collective analysis of issues at hand and the task to be undertaken; best achieved when all members of the group share in the vision and participate actively in articulating the purpose and goals of the activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controversy with Civility</strong></td>
<td>Recognizes two fundamental realities of any creative group effort: that differences in viewpoint are inevitable, and that such differences must be aired openly, but with civility. Civility implies respect for others, a willingness to hear each other's views, and the exercise of restraint in criticizing the views and actions of others. Requires trust amongst the group members; conflicts need to be resolved but also integrated into the common purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citizenship</strong></td>
<td>The process whereby an individual and the collaborative group become responsibly connected to the community and the society through the leadership development activity. To be a good citizen is to work for positive change on the behalf of others and the community. The practice of good citizenship should and needs to happen at every level of the model.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*<em>Change (<em>The Eighth C)</em></em></td>
<td>The ability to adapt to environments and situations that are constantly evolving, while maintaining the core functions of the group. Change is the value “hub” which gives meaning to the 7 C’s and is the goal of the creative process of leadership – to make a better world and a better society for self and others. (Astin and Astin, 1996).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Social Change Model of Leadership is a process and the seven C’s will be used by faculty and staff who serve as leaders for the Autism Workforce Program, to help make decisions that will positively effect change at the university by building a community of support across campus. Through campus partnerships, the Autism Workforce Program will enable mentors to become leaders and serve the Autistic population directly through jobs, internships or shadowing. They will serve the students in this program indirectly by building
a community that supports neurodiverse students to pursue their ontological vocation. This intervention will assist in removing the unconscious bias that may exist in society that purports that neurodiverse students are limited in their potential or future careers due to perceived differences.

**My Future Role in the Autism Workforce Program**

The role that I would like to have to lead this intervention is Associate Director of the Office of Student Services with Disabilities. This role would afford me the opportunity to have a collaborative, non-authoritative approach in my leadership role. I will lead with a collaborative, innovative, and team-based approach so every team member is valued and offered an opportunity to engage and contribute to the success of the program and our students.

My leadership will be inclusive of all mentors and their role in social justice and inclusion and will follow the ACPA & NASPA competencies of social justice and inclusion. I will align this program with research, practice, and full and equal participation of all groups in a society shaped to meet their needs” (Bell, 2010 p. 21). The future of our Autistic students could be shaped through the *Autism Workforce Program* to mutually benefit both student and mentor. The creative, organizational, neurodiverse perspective may have a positive effect on the lives of their mentors as well as society.

**Legal Obligations for Inclusion in Higher Education**

There is a long history of discrimination, segregation, and exclusion of disabled people in society. This discrimination excluded people with intellectual and developmental disabilities from receiving appropriate education, jobs, and housing. The Constitution, federal laws, and state laws have been established to ensure basic legal, civil, and human rights to all
citizens in our society regardless of their abilities. However, societal prejudices and the diversity of the needs of students identified with autism may keep these students from being fully included in higher education, employment, and society.

Though there are some regulations in place for higher education already, there is not a “one size fits all” scenario with the autistic population. The needs and disabilities of each student are unique, and each reasonable accommodation must be adopted based on the individual student needs. Higher education accommodations are covered under Subpart E of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Titles II and III of the ADA.

These laws and regulations guarantee students equal opportunity, reasonable accommodations, and federal and state protection under the laws. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states that schools must provide students with reasonable accommodations comparable to those provided to their peers. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects the student's privacy regarding educational records and gives them the right to self-disclose rather than being forced to disclose their disability. Any institution of higher education that is found by the Office of Civil Rights to be out of compliance with these laws may lose its federal financing which could potentially close an institution.

**Assessments, Evaluations and My Intervention**

*The Autism Workforce Program* will be evaluated throughout the semester through weekly formative assessments completed by mentors and summative measures at the end of the semester through student interviews. The program will also be measured by the following:

1. Retention and Persistence of students in the program - *Obtained from institutional*
research office on a yearly basis

2. Long-term Active Participation- Obtained from records in OSSD office

3. Employment after graduation - Obtained from follow up survey emailed to graduates

When considering how to measure a four-year program, proper assessment and evaluation measures can take many forms. There is not enough data on “Best Practice” for a program specifically for matriculated Autistic college students. In building this program, the assessments for our students will be measured by retention of the students in the program, long term active participation, and employment after graduation through an emailed survey.

In Planning Programs for Adult Learners: A Practical Guide, the authors assert, “program evaluation is most often defined as a process used to determine whether the design and delivery of a program were effective and whether the proposed outcomes were met” (Caffarella et al., 2013, p. 39). I believe the best way to ascertain if the program is successful is to interview the students at the end of every semester. The students will be asked the following questions:

1. Did you learn a new executive functioning skill this semester and if yes please describe the skill?

2. Did you learn a new job skill this semester and if yes please describe?

Autism Workforce Weekly Evaluation (Appendix B)

Rating Scale: 1-Performance plan needed, 2- Needs Development, 3- Proficient, 4-Exemplary

1. ATTENDANCE: Understand work expectations for attendance and adhere to them. Notify supervisor in advance in case of absence.
2. **PUNCTUALITY**: Understand work expectations for punctuality. Arrive on time for work, take and return from breaks on time, and call supervisor prior to being late.

3. **WORKPLACE APPEARANCE**: Dress appropriately for position and duties. Practice personal hygiene appropriate for position and duties.

4. **TAKE INITIATIVE**: Participate fully in task or project from initiation to completion. Initiate interaction with supervisor for next task upon completion of previous one.

5. **QUALITY OF WORK**: Give best effort, evaluate own work, and utilize feedback to improve work performance. Strive to meet quality standards.

6. **COMMUNICATION SKILLS**: Speak clearly and communicate effectively – verbally and non-verbally. Listen attentively. Use language appropriate for work environment.

7. **RESPONSE TO SUPERVISION**: Accept direction, feedback, and constructive criticism with positive attitude and use information to improve work performance.


9. **PROBLEM-SOLVING/ CRITICAL-THINKING**: Exercise sound reasoning and analytical thinking. Use knowledge and information from job to solve workplace problems.


This survey will be given weekly in a Qualtrics survey to each mentor to ensure that the students are learning and growing in their placement. This weekly assessment will also
bring any issues to the program leaders of skills that need to be built with the student during their weekly 1-1 sessions at the Office of Student Services. Having clear and direct communication weekly will allow for a positive flow of continuous communication.

**Limitations of the Program**

The program may be limited by the willingness of mentors/sites that are willing to volunteer their time and make the commitment to supervising students in this program. There are benefits and challenges to volunteering to be a mentor. The students that are partnered are building skills, but they will also be bringing many unconventional skills with them that must be valued. Many neurodiverse students have a meticulous eye for detail, are trustworthy and detail oriented. However, learning the skills necessary for supporting students that have autism is time consuming and perpetual. We are always learning new techniques and must continue to build new bridges with mentors to ensure long term success of the *Autism Workforce Program*. Not every mentor will be willing to take on the learning and focus that may be required to participate in this program.

This program will not be successful without active participation and a moral or ethical commitment in the hearts of mentors. The constraints of personal life obligations or career obligations may limit the availability of faculty and staff to volunteer for this partnership.

**My Future in Student Affairs**

Looking ahead I am concerned that life-altering situations or a crisis such as COVID 19 will deplete the opportunities for neurodiverse students to participate in hands-on programing. Future mentors are struggling to reorganize the structure of their own departments and filling gaps for their current students to be successful in this new online
dimension that we have been thrust into without warning. We are in a new “normal” that is requiring crisis intervention which may not include “volunteering” your time for programs like the *Autism Workforce Program*. The pandemic that we are currently facing provided an opportunity for all of us to grow and be conscious of their feelings of how change can affect us. It is also a glimpse into the emotions that students with autism feel daily with change. Change can be overwhelming for all people. Empathy for humanity in a time of crisis brings a new reality of conscious, thoughtful education into perspective.

I have no doubt that my role as an advocate for special needs students is a life calling. I will take this passion and fill the gaps for the neurodiverse students that I work with by helping them to feel safe in a world that turned upside down in a blip. As a neurotypical person I have the skills to adapt more easily than my Autistic friends. I call these students my friends because they are my heart and soul. Living with an invisible disability can leave you without a voice. I will be their voice and guide them through this darkness with a crisis intervention plan that recognizes their perceived limitations as a challenge are opportunities for creativity. I commit to helping students set and achieve their goals through clear communication, grace, and humor. Kindness is free!
References


Lucy, J. (2014). Participating, Navigating and Succeeding with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the


Welcome to the Autism Workforce Mentor Workshop. Why do we need programs like this on our college campus? According to the CDC, the prevalence for Autism population has increased to 1 in 59 children being diagnosed with Autism. A large percentage of these students will be matriculating into higher education. We must be prepared to support this historically marginalized population and equalize our education system.

The CDC has reported that by the year 2024 there will be over 200,000 students with autism searching for institutes of higher education. They have less than a 10% chance of getting a job after they graduate from college. That means that 90% of the autistic students that graduate will not find any job. Compared to their neurotypical peers who have less than a 4.8% chance of being unemployed after graduation. (CDC, 2018)
This program is a four-year pilot program that will provide employment readiness training to matriculated autistic students on campus through mentors and campus partnerships.

The Autism Workforce Program is an employment readiness program that provides real world job training and critical soft skills to Autistic students. The training is provided in partnership with faculty and staff who will serve as mentors.

Employment readiness training is just one of the many opportunities that we can create together for our Autistic students. It is a gateway to creating sustainable employment that can be transferable to real world employment opportunities. We can build these opportunities from your commitment to mentor. This partnership will offer training to students in their field of study which will be critical in building their resume for sustainable employment after graduation.

The students that you mentor will also be supported outside of their job shadowing, internship, or employment through weekly skill sessions in the areas of social skills, career readiness, independent living, social development, self-advocacy, and executive functioning. All soft skills will help the students to be successful in their roles with each of you as well as in their future jobs.

Funding is a major concern with higher education initiatives. We were very lucky that we may qualify for funding from multiple state and federal sources and that each of you have generously volunteered to help.
Communication has been key in my new role. Reaching out monthly to secure group topics for student development is key to the success of our employment readiness program. Helping to develop partnerships with the career development center to include training sessions at D-CAP monthly have allowed our students to get the skills necessary to start the employment process early in their academic career.
These new partnerships have refined my role as a skill specialist and facilitator of academic and career advancement. With the collaboration of the financial aid department and career development center we are building a sustainable plan for D-CAP's students. A large majority of our students qualify for work study regardless of income. This allows us to continue building bridges with our campus partners in various departments to create work study funded jobs that never existed for our students. The job descriptions are carefully crafted to ensure that all D-CAP students will be treated fairly, and that the department is trained in how to build equitable relationships with our students.
Equity & Inclusion

EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION
Rue, P. (2019). Why is it so hard for the student affairs profession to foster inclusive environments for learning? Bonding and bridging for community and democracy
* Inclusion in higher education
* Recognizing the potential of Autistic students rather than continuing the system oppression of this marginalized population

MENTORS AS CHANGE AGENTS
NASPA Journal, 40(2), pp. 29-42
* Faculty & staff will have a critical role in helping their institutions to transform themselves in response to outside challenges.
* Identifying and supporting the growing numbers of Autistic students matriculating into higher education

We can help to change the that disability is inability by deconstructing the limits that have been set for this historically marginalized population through the autism workforce program and your mentoring contributions. Through your willingness to mentor you will be making great contributions to the world and society. You are building a bridge to equality and inclusion inside higher education and society.
Social Justice and Inclusion are not “buzz” words. Providing equitable learning environments and equal opportunities for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder is ethically and legally our responsibility as humans. You can be change agents for a better tomorrow by building this partnership and volunteering to be mentors!

Real people not labels!

As a result of becoming more deeply aware of the crisis that faces ASD students that graduate from college and do not get jobs, you will be advocating for them through your mentorship role. Providing employment readiness and job training for Autistic students will be critical in helping to break the cycle of unemployment for this population. The Autistic students that do graduate from college with a degree, or even an advanced degree, may still struggle with their employment but you will have helped to build a strong foundation. As professional and society we have an obligation to ensure protection and equality for all people. As an institution of higher education, we bank on the knowledge that education opens doors and reduces the poverty level.

We must continue to fight the prejudice and inequality by looking through a critical lens and recognizing our role in supporting students. We can do this through transformative education, providing employment training and challenging false ideologies. Higher education is a small micro-cosmic reflection of what could be in the future, and we can break this cycle of systemic prejudice and low employment rates with a sustainable plan to build partnerships with likeminded people like all of you who will serve as mentors who will highlight the great potential of our autistic population.
Appendix B

Autism Workforce Weekly Evaluation

Rating Scale: 1-Performance plan needed, 2- Needs Development, 3- Proficient, 4- Exemplary

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5. QUALITY OF WORK: Give best effort, evaluate own work, and utilize feedback to improve work performance. Strive to meet quality standards.

6. COMMUNICATION SKILLS: Speake clearly and communicate effectively – verbally and non-verbally. Listen attentively. Use language appropriate for work environment.

7. RESPONSE TO SUPERVISION: Accept direction, feedback, and constructive criticism with positive attitude and use information to improve work performance.

9. PROBLEM-SOLVING/ CRITICAL-THINKING: Exercise sound reasoning and analytical thinking. Use knowledge and information from job to solve workplace problems.

10. WORKPLACE CULTURE POLICY AND SAFETY: Demonstrate understanding of workplace culture and policy. Comply with health and safety rules. Exhibit integrity and honesty.