Navigating Post-College Career Paths: Perspectives on Career Identity and Self-Efficacy from Autistic Alumni

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Navigating Post-College Career Paths: Perspectives on Career Identity and Self-Efficacy from Autistic Alumni

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education Administration West Chester University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

By

MaryEllen T. Stephens

May 2024

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Dedication

To my husband, Abe, you are my rock, steadfast and unyielding, providing shelter from the storms and the safe harbor in which I could anchor during this journey. Your patience and unwavering faith in me have mirrored the enduring love of Christ.

To my precious daughters, Rese, Devon, Abagail, and Gabriella, each one of you represents a unique blessing in my life. Your youth and wonder have served as a continual reminder of the divine joy and purity of spirit that Jesus encourages in all His children. You have inspired my commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and truth, and it is my sincerest prayer that this work might provide a beacon for you as you navigate your own paths.

To my sisters, Terry, and Lizz, you are my Miriam and Martha, my companions, and confidants in every step of this journey. To my brother James and sister Margie, you are warriors and confidence builders. Your encouragement, prayerful support, and enduring friendships have calmed my spirit in times of uncertainty.

To my dear mother, Margaret, your enduring strength, wisdom, and unconditional love have been my guiding star, a constant source of light leading the way through the darkest nights. Your fortitude and grace under trial have been a living testament to me.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my Creator, the author of wisdom and knowledge, whose grace has carried me through this journey. In the words of Psalm 46:5, “God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.” I give all glory and honor to You.
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To my beloved family, your unwavering faith in me has been a source of strength and courage. Your sacrifices, patience, and love have not gone unnoticed and are deeply cherished. You have been my source of inspiration and my safe haven.

Finally, to all those who, in one way or another, have contributed to the successful completion of this journey, whether by providing a listening ear, words of encouragement, or a helping hand, I am profoundly grateful.

This dissertation stands as a testament not just to my own academic efforts, but to the collective dedication, support, and wisdom of all those who have walked this path with me. To each and every one of you, my deepest thank you.
Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the employment experiences of autistic college graduates, capturing the positive stories of successful alumni in terms of career placement and success. Utilizing qualitative narrative research, the study uncovered the nuanced journey of participants transitioning from completion of their undergraduate degree into the workforce. Drawing upon the frameworks of Self-Determination Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory, the research focused on the motivational mechanisms driving career achievements among autistic individuals. Methodologically, this study involved in-depth interviews with a total of 7 autistic college graduates across a range of ages, genders, and sexual orientations. These interviews allowed for the exploration of themes related to career decision-making, post-graduate stress, and financial planning. Key findings included participants navigating uncertainty in career decision-making and demonstrating adaptability and perseverance in overcoming post-graduate stress. Additionally, participants managed the financial burden of student loans through proactive financial planning. These themes underscored the resilience, determination, and resourcefulness of autistic college graduates in the face of employment challenges. The findings of this study offer recommendations for educational institutions and college career services to better tailor their programs and services to meet the unique needs of autistic individuals. By highlighting the pivotal role of mentorship, integrated Autism support, adaptability, and resilience, the study provides valuable insights for supporting the success of autistic individuals in the professional world.
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Chapter 1

By the year 2024, an estimated 200,000 U.S. Autistic teenagers 1 will be aging out of the protection of IDEA under the K-12 education system (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal legislation in the United States that guarantees the provision of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students with disabilities, with a focus on meeting their unique educational requirements (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Until 1990, IDEA was known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates transition planning and services for K-12 students with disabilities, preparing them for post-secondary education, vocational training, and integrated employment. These high school graduates who are aging out of IDEA come to college with the hopes of obtaining their bachelor’s degrees and eventually a productive and useful job upon graduation (Hayward et al., 2019; Lorenz et al., 2016; Shattuck et al., 2012; Solomon et al., 2020), but there are few supports at the postsecondary level (Lorenz et al., 2016).

It is now more widely acknowledged in U.S. society that many autistic individuals are gifted and have a lot to contribute to larger society and industry (Kenworthy et al., 2010; Jacob et al., 2015). However, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, an alarming 85% of autistic adults who have completed college degrees remain unemployed after graduation (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). In fact, autistic individuals constitute a sizeable portion of the 477,000 “disencouraged workers” who are qualified for employment but remain unemployed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). “Disencouraged workers” is a label used to describe workers who have

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1 Throughout this research, the preference for identity first language over APA dictated person-first language has been employed, following the recommendation of the participants involved in the study. Identity first language prioritizes the acknowledgment of individuals' identities as integral aspects of themselves, which aligns with the perspectives and preferences expressed by those contributing to this research.
given up looking for work because there are no relevant job opportunities for them (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Current literature suggests that existing Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) vocational supports may fail to effectively support individuals with ASD (Brook et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2015; Goldfarb et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2019; Remington et al., 2018; Romualdez et al., 2021; Schall et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2012; Solomon, 2020). Research conducted outside of the United States demonstrates the potential benefits of support services as well as hurdles to performance (Remington et al., 2021; Romualdez et al., 2021; Qian et al., 2020).

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an increasing condition in higher education, demanding comprehensive support structures inside US colleges and institutions (Goldfarb et al., 2019; Qian et al., 2020; Remington et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2021). As of 2021, the landscape of these support mechanisms takes many shapes in colleges and universities (Scott et al., 2021). Many colleges and universities have recognized the unique needs of individuals with Autism by developing customized support programs. Specialized orientation sessions, specifically designed to adapt autistic students to the collegiate atmosphere, are central to these institutional initiatives (Pesonen et al., 2020). Academic coaching services, which include organizational techniques, time management, and studying strategies, are becoming more prevalent (Lee et al., 2019; Pesonen et al., 2020). Peer mentorship programs, in which autistic students are matched with autism.

2 Autism is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by a variety of symptoms and varying degrees of impairment in two core domains: 1) persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, and 2) restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. These symptoms often appear during the early developmental period and result in clinically substantial impairment in an individual's capacity to function socially, academically, or occupationally. Furthermore, co-occurring conditions and the level of intellectual functioning, ranging from intellectual disability to above-average intellectual abilities, can influence the presentation of Autism (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013).
trained peers, have also been shown to benefit social and academic integration (Scott et al., 2021; Pesonen et al., 2020).

In higher education, institutional disability services play an important role in ensuring that necessary accommodations, ranging from extended exam durations to specialized note-taking services, are easily available. On the peer front, several campuses are seeing the launch of student-led initiatives aimed exclusively at the neurodiverse population, assuring critical peer support, and boosting social contact (Pesonen, et al., 2020).

Support is critical to maintain concerted efforts spanning research, advocacy, and development of programs to address the needs of this student demographic holistically. While progress has been made in developing support frameworks for autistic students in higher education in the United States, discrepancies in service provisions exist between institutions (Goldfarb et al., 2019; Qian et al., 2020; Remington et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2021).

**ASD Support in Career Services**

As Autism support programs in colleges expand, more college students with Autism are participating in career readiness training and exploring employment options (Hayward et al., 2019; Lorenz et al., 2016; McDermott & Nachman, 2020; Shattuck et al., 2012). Career readiness for autistic individuals consists of a variety of factors adapted to their own talents, challenges, and needs. At its core, career readiness entails not only the development of job-specific skills but also the development of social, communication, and adaptive competences, which are frequently required by the constantly changing environment of the workplace (McDermott & Nachman, 2020; Autism at Work, n.d.). For autistic individuals, this may entail concentrated instruction on understanding workplace norms, improving executive functioning skills such as task management, and establishing sensory regulating strategies in a variety of
work situations (Hayward et al., 2019; Lorenz et al., 2016; McDermott & Nachman, 2020; Shattuck et al., 2012). Furthermore, it is critical to recognize that Autism Spectrum Disorder is broad; hence, career readiness will be intrinsically individualized, demanding specialized solutions that account for each person's unique strengths and limitations (Hayward et al., 2019; Lorenz et al., 2016; McDermott & Nachman, 2020; Romualdez et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, despite the career readiness training and support many autistic individuals struggle to find and keep jobs after graduation (Hayward et al., 2019; Lorenz et al., 2016; McDermott & Nachman, 2020; Remington et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2021; Shattuck et al., 2012; Solomon, 2020). 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 3.9% (Department of Labor and Industry, 2023).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the success stories of autistic college alumni when it comes to post-baccalaureate employment. Specifically, I examined the employment experiences of autistic college alumni who successfully secured employment after graduation and collected stories focusing on motivation and self-efficacy. The success stories I captured through this narrative study added nuance to the statistics cited by the CDC above (CDC, 2023). This researcher assumed that the success stories of autistic alumni would provide valuable insights into various aspects of Autism, from advocacy and inclusion to education, employment, and personal development.

This research study highlights not just the unique experiences and strategies adopted by these alumni, but also the supportive environments that assisted their advancement from academia to paid employment. The interview questions aimed to identify patterns of success,
common challenges, and strategies utilized to gain employment after graduation. This study goes beyond simple success stories by promoting frequently marginalized perspectives from the U.S. Autistic community. It aims to map the complex interactions between individual motivation, outside support networks, and societal structures.

This study highlighted the influence of motivation and self-efficacy in employment success from the perspective of autistic alumni. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, this study captured factors that influenced employment outcomes that contribute to post-baccalaureate employment success. Thus, there is an opportunity to investigate success stories more closely and learn from these positive cases (Aguinis et al., 2013; Ghosh & Vogt, 2012).

**Research Questions**

The research questions that will guide my narrative inquiry are:

1. What are common challenges faced by autistic undergraduate alumni in employment after graduation, and how did these alums successfully grapple with these challenges?

2. What specific experiences during college and during post-baccalaureate employment contributed to alumni’s growth, development, and self-confidence in the arena of career development?

The first research question aims to identify the many difficulties that autistic undergraduate alumni confront when making the transition to the workforce after graduation. This area of research has two driving forces behind it. First, one may be able to identify any gaps in the higher education and employment structures that may not sufficiently address the needs of autistic individuals by identifying the challenges these alumni experience. This could be anything from inadequate career counseling to employment settings that might not be accommodating of their interpersonal needs. Second, concentrating on how these obstacles were
overcome offers insights into the resiliency, techniques, and possible external support systems that aided their transition. It is important to recognize both the successes and the challenges that these students experienced since both can act as compass points for autistic graduates in the future and for organizations working to better support them.

The second research question will focus on the experiences that have boosted alumni's sense of self-worth, self-confidence, and professional development, both inside the academic environment and the subsequent employment field. This question recognizes that while every autistic person's journey is characterized by difficulties, it is also marked with opportunities for empowerment, education, and growth. Examining these beneficial encounters offers a holistic perspective, enabling the study to identify and promote circumstances that support such developmental experiences. This study emphasizes the value of meaningful employment that promotes both personal and professional enrichment in addition to the importance of growth, development, and self-confidence.

Overall, this study's simultaneous emphasis on difficulties and successes provides a full view of the holistic employment experiences of autistic college graduates. While addressing problems is essential to initiating systemic changes, emphasizing successes underscores the necessity for conditions that promote personal and professional growth, ensuring that autistic individuals not only secure employment but excel in their respective roles. Focusing solely on challenges results in a deficit-centered perspective but integrating a focus on success allows us to amplify a more complete understanding of the diverse capabilities, resilience, and potential contributions of autistic individuals in the workforce.

Rationale for Study
Supporting the employment of autistic college graduates extends beyond ethical considerations; it is a socioeconomic imperative (Hayward et al., 2019; Lorenz et al., 2016; Shattuck et al., 2012; Solomon et al., 2020). While autistic graduates bring unique skill sets and insights to the table, they frequently confront considerable employment barriers, such as societal biases, inflexible hiring practices, and workplace misconceptions (Dillahunt et al., 2021; Crucil & Amundson, 2017). These challenges often lead to underemployment or unemployment, depriving the economy of valuable talents that may include economic setbacks (Lopez, 2022; Goldfarb et al., 2019). Below, I highlight the importance of workplace inclusion and unemployment statistics of autistic individuals.

**Workplace Inclusion**

Promoting the employment of autistic college graduates can benefit U.S. society in numerous ways, from boosting economic productivity and lessening reliance on public assistance to fostering a more inclusive society (Hedley et al., 2016; Johnson & Joshi, 2016). This support also resonates with the ideals of social justice and human rights, reinforcing everyone's inherent right to dignified work and living (Hayward et al., 2019). As reported by Hayward et al. (2019) and echoed in studies by Lorenz et al. (2016), Shattuck et al. (2012), and Solomon et al. (2020), workplace inclusion signifies more than just integration of minoritized and marginalized people. It epitomizes societal recognition of the innate value and potential in each person, regardless of neurodiversity. Establishing such inclusive environments brings us closer to a society where everyone, irrespective of their neurological differences, is granted equal respect and opportunities, underscoring the core values of justice and equality (Kulkarni & Gopakumer, 2014; Lindsay et al., 2021; Lindstrom et al., 2014).
Acknowledging the apparent disparities in employment statistics for autistic individuals is essential. However, it is equally important to emphasize that the narrative extends beyond mere barriers. Frequently overlooked are the numerous success stories, filled with invaluable lessons and inspiration. Employment statistics, when analyzed with best-practice recommendations for defining, identifying, and handling outliers can yield more accurate and reliable insights into labor market trends and patterns, as highlighted by Aguinis et al. (2013) and Ghosh & Vogt (2012). By researching the experiences of autistic graduates who have successfully secured employment, I can gain a deeper understanding of the intricate challenges and potential avenues to success within this context. These stories become crucial case studies that highlight the way forward and provide a blueprint for fostering inclusive and supportive environments for individuals with Autism in the workforce.

**Problem Statement**

The problem that this study seeks to understand is the persistently high unemployment rate among autistic adults holding baccalaureate degrees. The Department of Labor and Industry (2023) recently released alarming statistics, demonstrating an astonishing 85% unemployment rate among people with Autism and 77% of these unemployed individuals are actively looking for work (Department of Labor and Industry, 2023). Additionally, 85% of college graduates with Autism are unemployed, compared to the national unemployment rate of 3.9% (CDC, 2023). Despite the different skills brought to the workplace by people with Autism, as demonstrated by Bury et al. (2020) and Goldfarb et al. (2019), these data highlight the potential need for greater transition support.

Despite their unique skillsets and perspectives, autistic graduates often face significant barriers to employment, including societal prejudice, rigid hiring practices, and workplace
misunderstandings (Grandin & Duffy, 2008; Hayward et al., 2019; Lorenz et al., 2016; Shattuck et al., 2012; Solomon et al., 2020). These barriers result in underemployment and
unemployment, leading to economic repercussions and a failure to tap into a rich pool of talent
(Hayward et al., 2019). Supporting the employment of autistic college graduates can yield
substantial benefits for U.S. society, from increasing economic productivity, reducing
dependency on public resources, to enhancing social inclusion (Lorenz et al., 2016).
Furthermore, supporting autistic college employment aligns with the principles of social justice
and human rights, affirming every individual's right to work and live in dignity (Hayward et al.,
2019).

Rationale for Methods

This study used a qualitative narrative research approach to better understand the
transition of autistic college graduates from academia to employment because it offers a human-
centered perspective on their experiences and provides a platform for them to share their stories
and insights. The approach aligns with the belief that narratives are powerful tools for unraveling
complex experiences and perspectives. This study recognizes that despite the unique skillsets and
potential that autistic college graduates bring to the workforce, they often face significant
barriers to employment. By focusing on narratives, this research aims to contribute to the
development of more inclusive and supportive workplaces, enhance social inclusion, and align
with principles of social justice and human rights. This approach allows me to explore not only
the challenges but also the opportunities that may make a meaningful difference in the lives of
autistic alumni. Qualitative research seeks to identify experiences, motives, and viewpoints by
interpreting data through words, images, or sounds (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The narrative
framework is central to this approach, emphasizing the value of individual tales, life histories,
and personal experiences in illuminating societal and personal phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Narrative research is a rich medium for diving into participants' subjective realities and lived experiences, providing for a more nuanced understanding of the context and purpose underlying each individual's journey (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). The use of this approach goes beyond simply capturing stories; it recognizes narratives as fundamental components of our social reality. According to Riessman (2008), narratives are complex in that they organize events in meaningful ways, integrating physical, cultural, and linguistic factors to create a comprehensive view of the participant's environment.

Narrative research concentrates on individual voices and stories giving a unique lens through which to examine wider societal, cultural, and experiential themes. I hope to achieve an in-depth understanding of this unique aspect of the autistic journey by collecting individual lived experiences, chronicling employment challenges, and interpreting personal stories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, when we explore the stories of a diverse group like autistic individuals, it helps us understand the wide range of experiences they have in both higher education and their careers. This approach allows us to notice common patterns of success, the problems they encounter, and the solutions they utilized.

Therefore, this study asks autistic college graduates that are employed to reflect on their journey to successful employment. This study centers on how autistic college graduates grappled with employment challenges and their experiences during college and after college that contributed to their success. This study is consistent with Narrative research, as defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Gubrium and Holstein (2009), and Riessman (2008). According to these researchers, Narrative research is a research approach that focuses on studying people's
lived experiences and stories. It gives a formal framework for understanding and deconstructing personal narratives, allowing for a more in-depth investigation of individuals' unique viewpoints and subjective realities. Narrative research is especially significant for this study because it allows me to investigate the personal narratives that explain the experiences of autistic college alumni as they move into the workforce. I intend to explore the multifaceted obstacles and success stories through the lens of Narrative research, shining light on the complex aspects of this transformation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 2008).

Finally, by focusing on narratives, this research not only adds to the academic body of knowledge but also provides practical insights to institutions, employers, and support organizations, assisting in the development of interventions, policies, and perceptions to best support the professional advancement of autistic individuals.

**Significance of Study**

The main difference between this study and the themes explored in the Gerhard and Shattuck articles lies in the perspective and emphasis of the research, as delineated by their respective et al. collaborators. This study and the focus of the articles lies in the perspective and emphasis of the research. While this study primarily centers on the experiences, motivations, and success stories of autistic college graduates during their transition from academia to employment, the Gerhard, Shattuck, and Lehman articles take a different approach.

The Gerhard, Shattuck, and Lehman articles do not primarily focus on the experiences of autistic individuals themselves but rather on external factors and systemic issues that contribute to the challenges faced by autistic people in their transition to employment (Gerhardt et al., 2014; Shattuck et al., 2012; Wehman et al., 2016). These articles investigate issues such as societal prejudice, rigid hiring practices, and policy-related factors. In contrast, this study emphasizes the
lived experiences of autistic individuals as they narrate their personal journeys, aiming to provide a platform for them to share their stories and insights.

This distinction is significant because much of the existing literature tends to approach Autism as the object of study, often overlooking the voices and narratives of autistic individuals themselves. This current study strives to address this gap by providing a narrative perspective from the standpoint of autistic college graduates, thus offering a unique and underrepresented contribution to the existing body of research. in accordance with the principles of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Gubrium and Holstein (2009), and Riessman (2008). The fundamental goal of this research is to have an in-depth understanding of the success stories of autistic alumni as told by them.

Therefore, this study examines the emotional aspirations, dreams, challenges, and moments of triumph that shaped their early professional journeys. The aim is to gain insights into their resilience, adaptability, and the societal obstacles they overcame. Rather than just presenting facts and analytical insights, the stories described by this research serves as a testament to the resilience and perseverance exhibited by participants. Simultaneously, the research endeavors to challenge and question the dominant cultural beliefs around Autism, shedding light on the multifaceted emotions and concerns that are intricately linked to this disability. By sharing genuine, firsthand experiences, this study illuminates the profound courage, adaptability, and innate talents within the autistic community. Ultimately, the goal is to foster a societal atmosphere where institutions and employers appreciate these narratives, propelling us towards a society marked by empathy and inclusivity.

This study underscores the need to cultivate an environment that emphasizes inclusive excellence, fostering greater societal awareness and dedication. This study sets out to illuminate
the successful post-college employment stories of autistic individuals, identifying prevalent challenges and successful strategies. Such insights stand to benefit multiple stakeholders: career services can refine their resources and guidance; employers can foster more inclusive work environments, and the academic sphere can develop robust support systems tailored to autistic students. Finally, as advocated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Gubrium and Holstein (2009), and Riessman (2008), the overarching goal is to cultivate a societal environment in which institutions and employers not only value these narratives but also actively contribute to creating a more empathetic and inclusive society.

In addition to addressing these issues, focusing on the employment of autistic college graduates aligns with my personal commitment to social justice and the preservation of full human dignity. Despite their unique skillsets and perspectives, autistic graduates often encounter significant employment barriers, such as societal prejudice against neurodiversity, rigid hiring practices that may not accommodate their individual strengths, and workplace misunderstandings that can stem from a lack of awareness about Autism and its potential contributions (Grandin & Duffy, 2008; Hayward et al., 2019; Lorenz et al., 2016; Shattuck et al., 2012; Solomon et al., 2020). These impediments lead to underemployment and unemployment, resulting in economic consequences and a failure to tap into their unique skills, perspectives, and attributes. (Hayward et al., 2019). Supporting the employment of autistic college graduates can result in significant benefits for US society, ranging from increased economic production to reduced reliance on public resources to increased social inclusion (Lorenz et al., 2016).

While previous studies have looked at the transition from college to employment for autistic people (Gerhardt et al., 2014; Shattuck et al., 2012; Wehman et al., 2016) this study takes a different approach, focusing on the voices of autistic people themselves, in accordance with the
principles of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Gubrium and Holstein (2009), and Riessman (2008). The fundamental goal of this research is to have an in-depth understanding of the success stories of autistic alumni as told by them. Rather than focusing merely on numerical data, this study distinguishes itself by immersing oneself in the personal narratives of autistic college graduates who have successfully obtained work.

This study sets out to illuminate the successful post-college employment stories of autistic individuals, identifying prevalent challenges and success strategies. Such insights stand to benefit multiple stakeholders: career services can refine their resources and guidance; employers can foster more inclusive work environments, and the academic sphere can develop robust support systems tailored to autistic students. Finally, as advocated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), Gubrium and Holstein (2009), and Riessman (2008), the overarching goal is to cultivate a societal environment in which institutions and employers not only value these narratives but also actively contribute to creating a more empathetic and inclusive society.

In addition to addressing these issues, focusing on the employment of autistic college graduates aligns with a more profound commitment to social justice and the preservation of full human dignity. Despite their unique skillsets and perspectives, autistic graduates often encounter significant employment barriers, such as societal prejudice against neurodiversity, rigid hiring practices that may not accommodate their individual strengths, and workplace misunderstandings that can stem from a lack of awareness about Autism and its potential contributions (Grandin & Duffy, 2008; Hayward et al., 2019; Lorenz et al., 2016; Shattuck et al., 2012; Solomon et al., 2020). These impediments lead to underemployment and unemployment, resulting in economic consequences and a failure to tap into their unique skills, perspectives, and attributes. (Hayward et al., 2019). Supporting the employment of autistic college graduates can result in significant
benefits for US society, ranging from increased economic production to reduced reliance on public resources to increased social inclusion (Lorenz et al., 2016).

Summary

This chapter provides insight into the critical issues experienced during the transition of autistic college graduates from academia to the workforce. Highlighting the impending challenges and triumphs while emphasizing the importance of the autistic experience. This chapter outlined the existing gaps in vocational support and provides background information for a narrative research approach to uncover success stories and gain valuable insights into the experiences of autistic college alumni. This chapter emphasizes this study’s academic importance as well as its capacity to influence institutions, employers, and support groups in a real-world way, promoting inclusivity and empathy in society.

Chapter 2 begins with an overview of the perceived societal role of higher education. The section that follows presents a literature review, exploring the fundamental theoretical concepts that serve as the basis for this study. The literature review will discuss current career services policies, programs, and practices that can influence post-college employment outcomes. Chapter 2 will conclude with an overview of the theoretical framework used for this study.
Chapter 2

This chapter is comprised of two main sections. The first section is dedicated to the literature review, which is structured into four segments. The initial segment explores the fundamental purpose of higher education. Subsequently, it examines the overarching role of higher education within society, encompassing aspects such as social responsibility and career readiness. Building upon the goals of higher education, the review proceeds to examine the historical development of career services within higher education institutions, tracing its evolution in response to changing job markets and workforce demands. Additionally, it explores modern methodologies and inclusive strategies, within the field of career services, with a particular focus on inclusive practices for all students, including those with disabilities.

The second section of this chapter is dedicated to discussing the theoretical framework that serves as the guiding framework for my research. In this section, I introduce and elaborate on two significant theoretical perspectives that underpin the research – Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Self-Efficacy Theory. These theories provide a solid foundation for understanding the motivational and cognitive factors influencing autistic individuals within the context of higher education and career services. SDT, developed by Deci and Ryan (2000), focuses on the innate human need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are central elements in shaping individuals' motivation and engagement in educational and career-related pursuits. Self-Efficacy Theory, proposed by Bandura (1997; 1999), examines how an individual's belief in their own capabilities impacts their goal setting, effort, and persistence in the face of challenges. By integrating these two theories into the study, I can gain a comprehensive understanding of the psychological and motivational aspects that influence students' engagement.
with career services within higher education institutions and how they utilized the supports they received. These theories will be further explored and applied throughout the subsequent chapters.

**Literature Review**

There is a tension in modern higher education that provokes deep thought, one that questions the fundamental nature and purpose of universities. On the one hand, there is a firm commitment to the traditional ideas of higher education, which sees it as a sacred space for the overall growth of people into informed and critical citizens (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2007). From this perspective, universities and colleges have goals that go much beyond pure vocational education. It is regarded as a nurturing environment for accountable and active members of society who value learning for learning's sake and have the capacity to actively contribute to the common good (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2007). On the other hand, there is an increasing focus on higher education as a practical way to ensure a successful career path (Keller et al., 2021). The present realities of student loan debt, financial security, and the urgent need for job opportunities that are lucrative may be motivational factors for this perspective (Mai, 2019). According to this perspective, a college degree is an essential entryway to a successful career and financial stability.

This literature review will first review the purpose of higher education to include social responsibility and career pathways. Second, I discuss career services’ historical development and ongoing evolution. Next, I examine modern methodologies and inclusive strategies utilized by career services. Last, I will review the philosophy shifts and future strategies of career services in higher education.

*Social Responsibility of Higher Education*
In this section, I will discuss the vital role of higher education in creating social responsibility, emphasizing its ability to develop essential skills, promote diversity and inclusion, and cultivate a sense of communal welfare and ethical decision-making in individuals. Higher education plays a critical role in shaping individuals who are not only well-prepared for the challenges of a globally connected society, but also driven to make lasting and constructive contributions to the welfare of their communities and beyond by providing students with the tools to engage in critical thinking and empathetic consideration of diverse perspectives.

Higher education has a crucial role in equipping individuals with the necessary skills and abilities to engage in critical thinking, embrace social responsibility, and nurture diversity and inclusion (Parr et al., 2013). By cultivating these qualities, higher education enables citizens to effectively examine complex problems, demonstrate empathy towards a wide range of opinions, and make ethical decisions within a globally connected society (Welch, 2009). Moreover, through the prioritization of community involvement, academic research, and a dedication to continuous education, higher education fosters within individuals a sense of responsibility towards the collective welfare and empowers them to make constructive contributions to society over the course of their lifetimes (Welch, 2009).

**Career Path of Higher Education**

In this section, I will explore the multifaceted relationship between higher education and career outcomes. I will also investigate the competitive graduate employment market, academic concerns about employability, and institutional responsibilities for improving students’ career prospects have impacted the landscape of career services in higher education.

At the same time, higher education is often viewed as an investment with direct benefits to the national labor market (Bennett, 2019). The relationship between education and the role of
education in shaping career outcomes is perceived to be essential for establishing a primary source of income (Keller et al., 2021). Bennett (2019) argued that higher education provides individuals with the tools they need to be successful in their chosen professions through skill development, and practical experiences. Higher education embraces the notion of adaptability, ensuring that graduates acquire not just specific skills but also a foundation of general knowledge that allows them to pivot and succeed in a wide range of positions and industries (Keller et al., 2021). Higher education is seen as a path to economic mobility, with the opportunity to gain higher-paying positions and improve one's overall quality of life and achieving financial stability (Spurk et al., 2019). The competitive post-graduation employment market, academic concerns about employability, and the policy premise that institutions are responsible for increasing students' employability may have an impact on the career services provided in higher education (Terzaroli, 2019). With the increasing focus on the vocational purposes and potential of higher education, institutions of higher education have created and grown services that focus on career development for enrolled students.

**Career Services’ Historical Development and Ongoing Evolution**

This third section of the literature review provides an overview of the history and ongoing evolution of career services in higher education. It spans the evolution of career services from their inception to their current condition, reflecting the shifting landscape of workforce preparation.

The evolution of career services in colleges and universities demonstrates a pattern of shifting approaches and goals. Initially, career services were centered on job placement, which Terzaroli (2019) investigated, underlining its importance in universities' futures. Terzaroli's research also emphasized the rise of faculty participation in student employment, a tendency that
began in the early 1900s and progressed from mentorship to a centralized institutional role for all students. Appointment Boards and Placement Offices' services, which were initially based on favoritism and mentoring, later evolved into a larger emphasis on equal access and job search assistance (Terzaroli, 2019).

Based on this historical framework, Schaub (2012) performed research that expanded our knowledge of the evolution of career services. Schaub's (2012) work reflected a transition from a narrow focus on job placement to a more comprehensive strategy that included career planning assistance. Schaub's (2012) concept was oriented on professional development, with students' particular characteristics serving as crucial components in preparing them for the workforce. This change underlined the importance of pursuing education and self-improvement over simply finding any employment. The findings of Schaub (2012) also highlighted the impact of technology, notably the expansion of virtual hubs, which transformed the accessibility of career services.

**Modern Methodologies and Inclusive Strategies**

In today's career services market, the emphasis has changed toward the comprehensive development of individual abilities and competencies. This section investigates how career services have evolved to fulfill students' different requirements while fostering diversity.

Clarke (2018) presented a competency-based paradigm for understanding occupational behavior, emphasizing student-career service partnership. The study by Nel and Neale-Shutte (2013) stressed the necessity of training graduates not only with academic knowledge but also with practical skills and experiences required for success in the professional sector. These modern techniques have led to a more complete approach to career services, including curricular
innovations such as internships and work placements focused on increasing graduate employability.

Inclusivity has also played a significant role in the creation of career services, notably for students with disabilities. Changes in legislation, such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, have encouraged career services offices to embrace more inclusive methods. This shift has evolved career services from a primarily passive to a more proactive position, acknowledging the special demands and obstacles that students with disabilities experience. Individualized counseling, self-advocacy courses, and coordinated efforts with employers to ensure appropriate adjustments have all been added to the offers of career services.

**Philosophy Shifts and Future Strategies**

This final portion of the literature review examines the pivotal philosophical shift within career services, transitioning from a historically deficit-based perspective to a strengths-based approach that places a strong emphasis on empowering students. A major transformation in the mindset governing career services has happened, in addition to institutional changes. This section investigates the philosophical shift from a deficit-based to a strengths-based approach, emphasizing student empowerment.

The change in focus demonstrates career services' dedication to establishing a more inclusive and equitable environment for all students, with a special emphasis on those with disabilities. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of aligning career services with educational missions as well as fostering awareness, understanding, and support for students with disabilities to ensure equitable access to career resources, mirroring the broader trend toward diversity and inclusivity in career services. This section provides an overview of the historical
evolution, contemporary practices, inclusivity, philosophical realignment, and future strategies of career services, emphasizing their adaptability in response to changing educational and workforce dynamics and their commitment to empowering and including all students.

Historically, the emphasis has been on what students with disabilities were unable to do (Helens-Hart, 2019; Vanhercke et al., 2014). However, there has been a discernible shift toward embracing a social model of thought (Helens-Heart, 2019). This shift entails identifying and removing environmental impediments to gradually convert to a strengths-based strategy (Helens-Heart, 2019). This paradigm shift indicates the commitment of career services to empowering students with disabilities, showcasing their potential contributions, and building a more inclusive and equitable approach to career development (Sharonrose & Ngubane, 2023).

In the future, career services programs must match with schools' educational missions and establish an inclusive atmosphere that supports all students. To promote equitable access to career services, initiatives should focus on increasing awareness, understanding, and support for students with disabilities (Sharonrose & Ngubane, 2023). According to Corrigan et al. (2001), disability understanding, and awareness are key components in creating a more inclusive environment for all students. This proactive approach is consistent with the larger shift toward diversity in career services (Sharonrose & Ngubane, 2023).

Finally, this integrated section presents a holistic assessment of career services' historical evolution, contemporary practices, inclusion, philosophical revisions, and future strategies. It emphasizes the adaptability of career services in response to changing educational and workforce landscapes, as well as the significance of inclusivity and empowerment for all students.

*Theoretical Framework*
The frameworks which guide this inquiry into the positive experiences of career is composed of two main theories: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Self-Efficacy Theory (SET). While SDT and SET have different focuses, the parallelism in their acknowledgment of factors like competence, autonomy, and relatedness highlights the similar significance of these elements on motivation, behavior, and general well-being. Understanding these connections helps to provide a more complete picture of the factors that influence people's motivation and success.

To learn what motivates and shapes career success in autistic college students, this study’s theoretical framework combines two theories: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Self-Efficacy Theory (SET). The role of SDT in examining the fulfillment of fundamental needs related to career identity and motivation has had a significant impact on employment (Wilson et al., 2008). Through the lens of SDT, self-efficacy can be seen as the results of meeting the goals for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Wilson et al., 2008).

**Self-Determination Theory (SDT)**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was developed by scientists Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan at the end of the 20th century (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Deci and Ryan (2000) have noted that the application of SDT extends to the examination of work outcomes and career development, specifically in the context of individuals with Autism and other disabilities. During the 1970s, Deci and Ryan compared internal and external motivation and realized that both significantly influenced behavior (Morris et al., 2022). Deci (1971) first studied intrinsic motivation, demonstrating that providing external rewards might impair an individual's intrinsic desire for a task. This laid the groundwork for a major tenet of SDT: the distinction between intrinsic motivation, which is doing something for the sake of doing something and extrinsic
motivation, which is doing something for purposeful reasons. These findings were published in a
book called, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior* by Edward L. Deci
& Richard M Ryan, which introduced STD as a sound empirical theory for understanding
motivation (Morris et al., 2022).

Since its inception, SDT has expanded to include basic psychological needs such as
autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These criteria are inborn,
universal, and fundamental for healthy human functioning and psychological growth. In contrast,
“need frustration” is linked to reduced self-determined motivation and negative outcomes (Ryan
& Deci, 2000).

This theory of human motivation and personality grew out of humanistic psychological
thought. It has been useful in many fields of study, such as education, health, employment
readiness, and sports, because it looks at human behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT is
recognized as a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding human motivation and
behaviors (Morris et al., 2022). SDT claims that individuals are naturally motivated towards
actions that lead to an improvement of both their mental and physical wellness and overall
efficacy (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

*Self-Efficacy Theory*

Self-efficacy is a person's belief that they can effectively complete a specific task
(Bandura, 1977, 1999). Personal expectations of efficacy are task-specific and based on four
sources of information: enactive mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion,
and physiological or affective states (Bandura, 1977). According to Bandura (1997, 1999), self-
efficacy has a strong influence on learning, motivation, and performance since people try to learn
and do only those things in which they believe. Bandura (1999) proposed that self-efficacy plays a significant role in shaping both the process of learning and subsequent performance outcomes.

According to Bandura's (1977, 1999) self-efficacy theory, task-specific beliefs are crucial in determining motivation, performance, and learning. Strong self-efficacy makes a person more capable of standing up for themselves, putting effort into their goals, and remaining resilient in the face of difficulty. Moreover, the development of self-assurance in one's capabilities carries profound consequences, encompassing the domain of professional achievement (Bandura, 1999).

Furthermore, cultivating self-belief in one's skills, as recommended by Bandura (1999), has consequences for future professional success. People are better prepared to face the difficulties and uncertainties of the working environment as they develop and maintain their self-efficacy. Essentially, self-efficacy plays a crucial role in determining an individual's capacity to pursue and achieve their professional objectives (Bandura, 1999).

Bandura's research is founded on the idea that one's personal expectations are not merely abstract concepts; they have concrete consequences in the real world (Bandura, 1977). Individuals who have strong self-efficacy are more likely to be naturally driven and engage in proactive task engagement (Bandura, 1999). They are willing to put in more effort in their objectives because they believe in their ability to succeed. As a result, assisting individuals in developing and strengthening their self-confidence in their talents has enormous promise, not only in terms of personal growth but also in terms of affecting their future career success (Bandura, 1999). Individuals who cultivate strong self-efficacy have the attitude and dedication required to thrive in their chosen careers because they approach activities with motivation, commitment, and an unwavering belief in their capacity to overcome problems.
As a result, helping individuals build and fortify their self-confidence in their abilities holds immense promise, not only in the context of personal development but also in influencing their future career success (Bandura, 1999). The cultivation of high self-efficacy equips individuals with the mindset and determination needed to excel in their chosen paths, as they approach tasks with motivation, commitment, and an unwavering belief in their ability to overcome challenges.

**Connecting Self-Efficacy to Self-Determination**

I am researching the complex employment experiences of autistic college graduates, with a focus on those who have successfully found employment within six months of earning their baccalaureate degree. Self-determination theory and Self-efficacy theory serve as the central theories in my research. I firmly believe that by combining these theories, I can offer a richer, more thorough framework that analyzes the complex motivation of autistic alumni.

Furthermore, according to the self-determination theory, humans have an innate drive that is fueled by three basic psychological needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It offers a window through which to see the innate elements that motivate and support behavior. Self-efficacy theory, on the other hand, strongly agrees with this by highlighting an individual's belief in their capacity to achieve desired results (Bandura, 1977, 1999). Not only does one need the innate drive, but also the confidence in oneself to fulfill that drive according to Bandura (1977, 1999).

By combining these ideas, I will present the complex story of autistic alumni, from the self-confidence emphasized by self-efficacy to their innate drives derived from SDT. Together, they blend the internal forces that drive action and self-reflective confidence in one's abilities into a comprehensive story. Finally, by adopting this multifaceted viewpoint, I hope to produce
practical insights that will help autistic graduates more smoothly navigate the crucial transition from college or university to the workforce.

Within the context of my dissertation, I am conducting an in-depth exploration of the employment experiences encountered by college graduates on the Autism spectrum, with a specific emphasis on individuals who successfully obtained employment within a six-month timeframe following to their graduation. At the center of my research lies the integration of two fundamental theories: Self-determination theory and Self-efficacy theory. I have made the decision to incorporate these theories because they offer a thorough framework for understanding the motives and beliefs guiding the behaviors of autistic alumni. According to the self-determination theory, individuals are driven to develop and transform themselves by three inherent psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. This is in perfect alignment with the idea of self-efficacy, which emphasizes a person's confidence in their capacity to achieve results. By integrating these theoretical frameworks, I can explore the complexities of the autistic experience, encompassing both internal motivations and self-perception. The use of this integrated lens provides an additional and nuanced understanding of the various factors that contribute to the advancement of early employment success among autistic alumni. I hope to gain practical knowledge from this research that will help autistic alumni as they move from academic to professional environments.

Figure 1.

*Theoretical Framework*
Figure 1 shows a visual representation of the 'Individual Needs and Beliefs' rectangle. This highlights the fundamental intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that shape my perception of how people perceive and act. The diagram divides into two primary theoretical pathways based on this foundation: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Self-Efficacy Theory (SET). Moving along the SDT path, I outlined three key components: “autonomy,” “competence,” and “relatedness.” Each represents an innate psychological need that is essential for driving motivation and performance. The SET pathway, on the other hand, leads us to a single, but crucial concept: 'Belief in One's Capabilities,' reflecting the essence of Bandura's perspective on the power of self-belief. From these various components, arrows converge towards the central outcome of 'Enhanced Motivation and Performance'. This convergence represents the goal of both theories, demonstrating the highest point of motivation and performance. I have highlighted the arrows from 'Autonomy,' 'Competence,' and 'Belief in One's Capabilities' to emphasize their shared importance in the nexus of motivation and performance. Self-efficacy, according to
Bandura (1977, 1999), is a person's ability to control their own motivation, behavior, and social environment. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), achievement of goals and maintenance of motivation in work are possible by satisfying the fundamental psychological needs like autonomy, competence & relatedness.

The sections that follow examine each of the three interconnected linkages between self-efficacy and distinct psychological requirements, with a focus on their importance for individuals with Autism. These findings highlight the relevance of self-efficacy in building autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the setting of individuals with ASD, ultimately leading to their success in higher education and transition to the workforce. In addition, the use of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a conceptual framework in this study provides valuable insights into improving the vocational readiness of individuals with Autism by addressing their fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness across multiple settings. This method, when combined with Self-Efficacy Theory, provides a thorough explanation of the motivational mechanisms that drive the career achievements of college students with Autism.

**Self-Efficacy and Autonomy**

Self-efficacy has been connected to autonomy, the psychological need to experience self-direction and personal endorsement in the start and regulation of one's activity (Bandura's (1977, 1999). When people believe they have the freedom and volition to make choices and decisions, they develop a sense of personal agency, which boosts their self-efficacy beliefs (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Autonomy and self-efficacy are both important in the setting of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder may confront distinct obstacles in social and academic contexts. Giving children individualized support that supports self-directed learning and decision-making allows kids to build a sense of agency. This
empowerment boosts their self-efficacy, allowing students to handle higher education and the move to the workforce with greater assurance and capability.

**Self-Efficacy and Competence**

Self-efficacy is closely linked to competence, or the desire to be competent in interactions with other people and to seek out appropriate challenges. People's sense of self-efficacy improves when they have chances to do things well and get positive feedback (Ryan & Deci, 2006). The relationship between self-efficacy and competence is equally important in the case of students with Autism.

Individuals with ASD may face unique obstacles in social interactions as well as academic settings. Creating circumstances that allow autistic individuals to excel, receive constructive criticism, and engage in pleasant social interactions, on the other hand, can have a substantial impact on their sense of self-efficacy. This, in turn, can encourage ASD students to actively seek out appropriate challenges, enhance their competence, and confidently negotiate the intricacies of higher education and future career.

**Self-Efficacy and Relatedness**

Relatedness, or the desire to develop secure and gratifying ties with others in one's social context, might influence self-efficacy indirectly. Individuals' self-efficacy views can be enhanced by supportive interactions, particularly those that create autonomy and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The connection between relatedness and self-efficacy is crucial when it comes to individuals with Autism. For those with ASD, making and sustaining social bonds can present difficulties. However, their self-efficacy can be significantly impacted by focused interventions and assistance that foster safe and fulfilling relationships with others. Education professionals and support services can enable students with ASD to improve their self-efficacy, negotiate the
challenges of postsecondary education, and pursue their academic and professional goals with greater confidence and motivation by establishing settings that foster positive social interactions and a sense of belonging.

More specifically, the utilization of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a conceptual framework in this research provides significant perspectives on improving the vocational readiness of individuals with Autism by considering self-efficacy, which encompasses perceptions of capability and assurance. According to Baron-Cohen (2001), self-efficacy plays a crucial role in influencing motivation, performance, and overall well-being. The cultivation of inclusive practices that address students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness across different contexts is essential in meeting these fundamental requirements (Baron-Cohen, 2001). The utilization of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has the potential to offer valuable guidance to colleges and universities in enhancing their provision of support for the career development of these students.

Furthermore, this study effectively examines the satisfaction of fundamental needs related to career identity and motivation by adopting Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as the underlying theoretical framework. Concurrently, the incorporation of Self-Efficacy Theory within this framework strengthens the understanding of the motivating processes driving the career achievements of college students with Autism.

Summary

This chapter highlighted relevant material on the changing landscape of career services in higher education. It focused on how these services have evolved to fit the rising diversity of student populations. Furthermore, it incorporated the Self-Efficacy Theory Bandura (1977, 1999) within the SDT theoretical framework (Ryan & Deci, 2006) to improve our understanding of
what inspires successful alumni. However, it is important to highlight that there is a scarcity of research focused on the obstacles faced by students in higher education from a post-employment standpoint, and the existing studies tend to be broad and not from a personal perspective. The literature review conducted in this study offers a thorough examination of the historical background of career services and presents current perspectives on the prevailing practices in this field. This study emphasizes the need for ongoing research to inform the development of career services, ensuring a comprehensive approach that effectively caters to the diverse needs of all students as they strive for successful employment. This theoretical framework functions as a foundation, connecting each of these areas of research and offering an integrative lens through which we can better understand and improve the role of career services in higher education. Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology for this study. I will use narrative research to focus on positive stories of autistic alumni who obtained employment after earning their baccalaureate degree.
Chapter 3

This chapter provides an overview of the qualitative research strategy and methods used in this study. The major goal of this study is to conduct a comprehensive exploration of the autistic alumni’s lived experiences, in accordance with the principles of qualitative research described by Merriam (1998). This chapter includes an overview of the research design, methods, participants, data collecting, coding, and analysis, as well as credibility and trustworthiness.

Research Design

This study used a qualitative narrative approach (Merriam, 1998; Clandinin & Connelly, 2006) to explore the post-baccalaureate employment success stories of autistic college graduates. In qualitative research, the goal was to understand how participants' lived experiences fit together to create a complete picture. According to Merriam (1998), qualitative research was “grounded in the lived experiences of people” and involved gathering data that emphasized important connections and encounters. This methodology was selected because, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), “a rigorous thematic approach could produce an insightful analysis that answered specific research questions” (p. 97).

Narrative research, as outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2006), offered a valuable methodological approach that aligned seamlessly with the qualitative research design of this study. Within the framework of narrative research, the research process revolved around understanding the experiences of autistic alumni through the stories they told. In the context of this study, it was not just about collecting data but rather about exploring the lived experiences of autistic graduates and allowing them to narrate their personal journeys. Clandinin and Connelly's (2006) perspective on narrative research aligned with the central premise of this research - to
provide a platform for participants to share their stories, not only to understand their career development and motivation but also to contribute to a broader understanding of how autistic individuals navigated their post-college transition into the workforce.

Clandinin and Connelly also emphasized the importance of connecting with people through narratives. This method was especially relevant given this study's emphasis on autistic alumni's personal growth, struggles, and triumphs. It emphasized the idea that narratives evolved and deepened over time as people reflected on their experiences. This research sought to explore the multifaceted career development narratives of autistic college alumni, providing a more profound insight into the intricate and unique journeys they undertook and ultimately contributing to the enhancement of support systems for this specific population by adhering to the principles of narrative research.

Through the application of these methodologies, the objective was thoroughly investigate the various aspects of motivation and self-efficacy. The data that was collected not only had the potential to address the research questions but also had the capacity to enhance the understanding of the various factors that impact career outcomes within this specific population. Consequently, this could potentially inform the creation of more effective interventions and support initiatives aimed at improving career prospects for college students and graduates on the Autism spectrum.

**Inclusion Criteria & Demographics**

This section delineates the inclusion criteria, participant recruitment process, participant demographics, developed to align with the research objectives, and offers an overview of participant demographics. Finally, I will detail the interview setting.

**Inclusion Criteria**
In determining eligibility for participation in this study, several criteria were established to ensure the coherence and relevance of the participant pool. Eligibility was determined when participants met the following criteria: they identified as autistic, as confirmed by formal diagnosis or self-identification, were adults aged 18 years or older, provided Informed Consent in English to ensure data consistency, earned a baccalaureate degree in the United States, and transitioned to full-time paid employment after receiving their bachelor's degree. These criteria were closely monitored to ensure that the participant pool for this study was appropriate and consistent (see Appendix III).

**Participant Recruitment**

Recruitment challenges arose during the recruitment process for this study, specifically with the eligibility criteria, which required participants to be employed and college graduates. Beyond just restricting the pool of potential participants, the combination of these criteria generated subtle connection barriers and trust. In addition to reducing the number of possible participants, the convergence of these criteria adds subtle relationship hurdles and trust variables that people had to consider before agreeing to participating. Since participant selection for a study of this kind necessitated navigating these complex relationships, building trust, and ensuring a participative approach was essential. The unique prerequisites highlighted the intricate nature of assembling a sufficiently representative sample, necessitating not only a personal approach but also great effort to address trust factors and overcome potential hesitations to participate.

In this context, establishing a sense of trust and ensuring a participatory approach was imperative, recognizing the need to navigate these nuanced dynamics in participant selection for the study. Given the unique prerequisites highlighted, the intricate nature of assembling a
sufficiently representative sample, necessitating not only a personal approach but also significant effort to address trust factors and overcome potential hesitations to participate.

First, I engaged my personal network to include Facebook connections and my LinkedIn network via post (Appendix VII) and personal messaging (Appendix VIII), leveraging existing relationships and connections within the community of autistic adults who are college graduates. I have worked in this field for 23 years and have deep connections to a range of alumni from several institutions of higher education in my local region. Given the fact that so many autistic alumni ended up unemployed or did not find employment after graduation, it is essential that I use my personal network to identify individuals who may have successfully obtained employment. The goal was to solicit participation from individuals within my networks who met the study's criteria and may be interested in sharing their experiences.

Second, I employed a 'snowballing' or 'chain-referral' sampling method for recruitment of study participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). In this approach, participants were asked to refer to other individuals they knew who also fit the study's criteria by forwarding a generic email (Appendix IV). This approach did not yield any participants.

Participants

I reached out to 35 potential participants via personal LinkedIn messages. Of these, two did not respond, six agreed to participate, four declined, nine were not currently employed, and five did not hold a baccalaureate degree. Additionally, I personally emailed ten prospective participants, of which three did not respond, four reported being without employment, one had not completed their undergraduate degree, one agreed to participate, and one was still in the process of completing their studies. A public post on LinkedIn and Facebook yielded one
response; however, this individual did not meet the eligibility criteria as they had not graduated from college.

A group of seven individuals who met the inclusion criteria were chosen to participate in semi-structured interviews. Convenience sampling described previously was used to include people who had participated in college Autism support programs, which may raise questions about their credibility. In this instance, both the participants and the researcher had taken part in college-level Autism support programs. Credibility and reliability will be addressed in the section that follows.

All participants of this study met the inclusion criteria and are over the age of 18, autistic, employed professionals who earned a baccalaureate degree. Participation in this study was voluntary. After completing a demographic questionnaire (Appendix III), participants who met the study's eligibility requirements were asked to fill out an informed consent statement (Appendix V). The participant demographics are described in further detail in the section below.

**Participants Demographics**

This study examined a varied group of seven individuals across several demographic characteristics. Casey, a 26-year-old German woman, identified as heterosexual and was a middle-income, first-generation college student with a bachelor's degree. Aaron, a 26-year-old heterosexual male of Irish origin, was a high-income earner with a bachelor’s degree and parents who held advanced degrees.

Kai, another 26-year-old female, was heterosexual, of English descent, and belonged to the middle class. Kai, a first-generation college student, had a bachelor’s degree, but her parents had a master’s degree and a bachelor’s degree, respectively. Avery, a 30-year-old heterosexual German male, represented high-income status, as he had a master’s degree and parents with
degrees. Jess, a 29-year-old female of Black/Latino ethnicity, fell into the middle-income bracket, having a bachelor’s degree and a dad with a doctorate. Jay, a 32-year-old heterosexual male of Slavic origin, was a high-income individual with a bachelor’s degree and parents who both had advanced degrees—one with a Doctorate and the other with a Master's. Elliot, a 23-year-old nonbinary person with a bisexual orientation, belonged to the Two or more races category. They were first-generation college students with a bachelor’s degree. Elliot's parental education consisted of both parents completing high school. This diverse cohort shed light on the complex intersections of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, generational status, and educational attainment within the sample group. Next, I provided a table of participant demographics.

**Figure 2.**

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSEUDONYM</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>SEXUAL ORIENTATION</th>
<th>RACE</th>
<th>SES</th>
<th>FIRST-GEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avery</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliot</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Two or more</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Slavic</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jess</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Black/Latino</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kai</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table presents demographic information for each participant, including age, gender, sexual orientation, race, socioeconomic status, and first-generation status.

**The Interview Setting**

The study was conducted within Zoom, which offered the option to disable cameras and utilize voice-only recordings. The utilization of Zoom as a platform for this study facilitated the opportunity to engage with participants residing in several locations, while simultaneously ensuring a secure space for the disclosure of information and the preservation of anonymity.
Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants, and any identifying information was avoided in the account of the interview. The Zoom interviews were conducted from the researcher's WCU account, in a private space to maintain confidentiality of information shared by respondents. The Zoom audio recordings were deleted immediately following transcription. In the event that the audio Zoom recording failed, simultaneous audio-only recordings were made from my personal phone. The phone recordings were deleted immediately upon confirmation of the Zoom recording.

Seven interviews were conducted ranging in time from 60-90 minutes with an average of 75 minutes. Throughout the interview process, it was critical to convey to participants that their comfort and well-being were of the utmost importance. Participants were informed that they had the option of declining to answer any questions that caused them discomfort or distress. They were also reminded that they could end the interview at any time or seek a break if they felt it was necessary. This adaptability in the interview process was intended to make participants feel comfortable and empowered, while also building an environment of trust and open communication, which added to the quality and depth of the data obtained.

**Procedures**

This section offers a detailed overview of the participant recruitment process, the materials used in the study, and data collection and analysis procedures. Each subsequent section provides a thorough analysis of every stage, commencing with participant recruitment. The application of this comprehensive methodology ensures a systematic and rigorous approach to collecting and analyzing study data.

**Description of Materials**
The materials that were used in this research encompassed several components, namely the Informed Consent (Appendix V), the Qualtrics Demographic Intake Form (Appendix III), the Email Invitations for participants (Appendix I) and for snowball sampling (Appendix II), Facebook & LinkedIn Posts (Appendix VII), Facebook & LinkedIn Personal Messages (see Appendix VIII), and the Interview Protocol (Appendix VI). The materials used in this study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix X).

**Informed Consent**

The process of obtaining informed consent included informing the research participants on the main components of a study and what their participation would entail (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). One of the key elements of the ethical conduct of research with human subjects was the procedure of obtaining informed consent. A structured informed consent method, as detailed by Marshall and Rossman (2016), was used to uphold ethical standards in this study.

After completing the preliminary Qualtrics survey, which screened for inclusion criteria, potential participants were given the informed consent form (see Appendix III). This form explained the major aspects of the study, such as its objective, guiding research questions, participant expectations, any associated risks, and confidentiality agreements. It further highlighted that participation was fully voluntary and no compensation would be given.

**Qualtrics Demographic Intake Form**

Participants were prompted to complete the demographic survey (Appendix V) after providing consent. This study asked for vital demographic information such as gender identity, race, ethnicity, and educational levels of both participants and their parents. Participants were also asked about their post-graduation employment status, specifically if they had found paid employment after graduating. The inclusion of such demographic characteristics as first-
generation status and highest education level was critical to understanding the influence of families on educational choices and support systems.

**Email Invitations for Participants**

The email invitation provided in Appendix I was used as a primary tool for recruiting participants, both from current and former contacts. I personally sent out this invitation through email, encouraging potential participants to participate in the study based on their unique experiences as autistic adults. I emphasized the importance of the study, indicating that I was interested in learning about their college experiences, career development experiences, and transition into the workforce following graduation. In the email, I outlined the participation process, which included online semi-structured interviews with a strong commitment to confidentiality and the protection of personally identifying information.

I invited interested participants to complete a four-question eligibility Qualtrics survey (see Appendix III), provide informed consent (see Appendix V), and if qualified, to respond to an eleven-question demographic survey (see Appendix IV) using a provided link or by scanning a QR code near the end of the email. I also invited participants to contact me if they had any questions or concerns regarding the research. I ended the email by thanking them for their time and emphasizing the tremendous contribution their involvement could make to our understanding and support for the professional development and success of autistic college graduates.

**Email Invitations for Snowball Sampling**

Appendix II's email invitation to snowball participants served as a recruitment email that I would have utilized to recruit persons referred by other research participants. I intended to introduce myself and invite the receiver to join in my study. The same process for standard email
would have been repeated from this point. The participants did not refer to any additional prospective candidates for this study as they were not sure that anyone that they knew met the criteria. Therefore, I did not secure any respondents through snowballing for this study.

**Facebook & LinkedIn Posts**

I intended to leverage my social networks on Facebook and LinkedIn to recruit participants (see Appendix VII). These posts outlined the ongoing research study aimed at gathering accounts of achievement from autistic college graduates. I intended to share that involvement in this project had the potential to serve as a representation of perseverance and success, providing crucial perspective that could contribute to the enhancement of support networks and resources for future college graduates with Autism. The purpose of these posts was to emphasize that the study was to investigate shared obstacles, individual development, and self-assurance in the progression of careers among college graduates with Autism. The communication explicitly indicated that there would be no compensation for involvement, and that the individuals involved were required to participate in a one-on-one Zoom interview relating to their collegiate experiences, professional path, and personal development. I clarified that strict confidentiality would be maintained. The post also included eligibility requirements such as identifying as an autistic individual, having earned a baccalaureate degree, and having found paid employment within six months of graduation. If they met these criteria and were interested in sharing their story, they could use the QR code or link to register and complete the Informed Consent. I also included the following tags: #AutismSuccessStories #CareerDevelopment #ResearchStudy #MakeADifference.

**Facebook & LinkedIn Personal Messages**
I utilized my personal Facebook and LinkedIn connections to extend a personal invitation to participate in my research study (see Appendix VIII). In this message, I encouraged personal contacts with autistic individuals who had also achieved their baccalaureate degrees to engage in my research study focused on the accomplishments of autistic college graduates. I clarified that the study focused on autistic individuals who had found work within six months of receiving their bachelor’s degrees. I stated that there would be no financial compensation for participation and that all information gathered would be kept strictly confidential. I encouraged them to participate by highlighting that their role could be critical in the professional development of future autistic college students and graduates. Following that, I explained to them that participation required a one-on-one interview and informed consent. They were directed to scan the QR code or access a link to register. Finally, I thanked them for their time and consideration.

**Interview Protocol**

Qualified candidates were invited to participate in a one-on-one Zoom interview (see Appendix VI). Interviews were conducted with the purpose of capturing personal information beyond what surveys may have been able to provide. The information gathered during the interviews allowed for more in-depth analysis and interpretation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The semi-structured interviews also allowed for the autistic alumni to share their story in their own words giving voice to their personal journey.

Questions in the interview focused on employment perceptions, barriers, motivators, and other influences. Appendix V contained the formal interview questions. The same formal initial questions were used in every interview, but intermediate questions were allowed to direct the conversation and probe participants for elaboration and greater insight into their opinions and personal experiences. Seven interviews were conducted, and they lasted 60-90 minutes. At the
end of each interview, participants were offered the opportunity to add any additional thoughts they may have had on the interview topics and share any advice or story that they felt supported their journey. My introductory messages also clarified that there would be no compensation for participation and that they could stop the interview at any time.

The interview questions were organized into three key sections to explore various aspects of the participants’ lives, experiences, and personal perspectives of their overall career transition. The first part examined their background and college experience. I wanted to understand the participants’ family dynamics, the timing of their Autism diagnosis, and their high school experiences. Additionally, we discussed their college choice, major selection, and the challenges and triumphs they may have encountered during their college years.

The second part of the interview focused on academics and personal growth. I was interested in their academic journey, how it influenced their personal development, and their experiences with socialization during college, including how these relationships impacted their overall college experience and career success.

In the third section, I explored their career development and post-graduation experiences. This included participants current employment, the experiences that contributed to their career success, and the aspects of their college experience that were most beneficial for their transition into the professional world. I also discussed their job search, interview process, and their professional journey post-graduation, with a specific focus on motivation, successes, and challenges they may have faced.

The final question encouraged participants to reflect on the support or resources they may have wanted more of during their college years to better prepare them for post-college employment. Furthermore, participants were offered an opportunity to share a memorable
moment that encapsulated their overall experience. Finally, participants were invited to suggest any important aspects related to career development, motivation, and self-efficacy that I may have missed. Their insights were invaluable in enriching the study's findings (see Appendix V).

**Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection employed in this study was semi-structured interviews. These interviews served to gather narratives and vignettes from alumni participants, allowing them to openly articulate and share their unique experiences (Saldaña, 2016). I secured interviews with 7 individuals who met the research criteria and signed the informed consent. Through these interviews, I explored the motivation and self-efficacy experiences, perspectives, and insights of the participants. Semi-structured interviews offered a balance between adaptability for exploring individual experiences and providing enough structure for conducting comparative analyses across interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews facilitated the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Merriam, 1998). They were particularly suited for capturing the depth and intricacies of participants' experiences, while also allowing for the recognition of commonalities and disparities across the dataset (Saldaña, 2016). This approach aligned with the goals of my narrative study, as it provided a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationships between motivation and self-efficacy among autistic alumni.

**Data Analysis**

Saldaña (2016) provided a succinct definition of “code” as “a concise word or phrase that encapsulates a crucial, summarizing, essence-capturing, or evocative feature in language-based or visual data” (p. 4). Coding played a pivotal role in bridging the qualitative data collection
phase and the subsequent data analysis phase of the study. It was essential to acknowledge that coding was not a precise science with definitive right or wrong answers. Given that the researcher served as the primary investigator in this qualitative research, coding represented an interpretive, intuitive, and exploratory process that demanded creative problem-solving and data synthesis (Saldaña, 2016). The identification of patterns throughout the coding process proved to be an effective strategy as it enhanced the trustworthiness of the data.

Saldaña (2016) further emphasized that through successive rounds of coding and recoding, codes and categories could evolve into more sophisticated forms and, depending on the methodological approach employed, even become more abstract and conceptual (p. 12). Many qualitative inquiries generated thematic ideas as an outcome of the coding process and reflective analysis. These themes encompassed broader concepts than individual codes and often involved both inductive and deductive coding, contributing to the study's overall conclusions (Saldaña, 2016).

In my study, I systematically integrate Saldaña's (2016) coding principles within the theoretical frameworks of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Self-Efficacy Theory (SET). Two rounds of coding were conducted to align with the core principles of SDT and SET. Codes were designed to represent the theoretical constructs inherent in these frameworks. For instance, codes were formulated to encapsulate autonomy, competence, relatedness, self-efficacy, and other pivotal components of SDT and SET. These codes underwent iterative updates as the coding process advanced, incorporating more abstract and conceptual aspects that mirrored the broader concepts derived from my theoretical frameworks.

Saldaña's (2016) concept of code refinement aligned with the progression of codes into more conceptual categories. Additionally, as Saldaña (2016) emphasized, the transition from
codes to themes coincided with the development of higher-level theoretical constructs that corresponded to SDT and SET. These constructs were shaped by the relationships and patterns unearthed in the data, thereby establishing connections between individual codes and more comprehensive theoretical concepts. Comparative analyses were undertaken to explore how codes and themes interrelated with the components of SDT and SET. This analytical approach enabled the researcher to delve into potential relationships and discrepancies between the two theoretical frameworks.

Throughout the coding and thematic analysis process, a flexible and reflective stance was adopted. The analysis was continually adjusted and enhanced by regularly reviewing the codes, themes, and their alignment with the theoretical frameworks. Transparency and reflexivity remained critical, and vigilance regarding personal biases and subjectivities ensured that interpretations of the data in relation to SDT and SET were both transparent and rigorously scrutinized. This comprehensive methodology served as the foundation for the qualitative research and theoretical exploration within this study.

**Theming the Data**

The next critical consideration was identifying themes in the interview data collected. What counted as a theme was something that captured the key idea about the data in relation to the research question and represented some level of patterned response or meaning within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). This process of identifying and developing themes was informed by both Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework and Saldaña's (2016) valuable insights.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The thematic method was chosen because it was not restricted to any theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). When investigating the potential relationship between career identity and self-efficacy, there may have
been experiences that were not accounted for; therefore, the analysis structure had to be flexible to reflect the reality of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Saldana's perspective further enriched this process by emphasizing that codes and categories created during data analysis could evolve into more refined, abstract, and conceptual themes over the course of the analysis. Themes were not limited to linear progression but could be multidimensional and multifaceted, reflecting the richness and complexity of the data (Saldana, 2016). This dynamic and iterative process encouraged researchers to engage in a reflective and interpretive approach, allowing for the emergence of deeper and more nuanced understandings of the data (Saldana, 2016).

The initial stage of the analysis process involved transcribing the interview transcripts, preparing the data for thematic analysis. The analysis followed the six-stage process described by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. This combined guidance from both Braun and Clarke (2006) and Saldana (2016) ensured that the research-maintained depth and integrity throughout the thematic analysis process.

**Reliability and Validity**

It was critical to address problems about the reliability, validity, and trustworthiness of research findings in every study, quantitative or qualitative. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined reliability as the consistency of the analytical techniques, including accounting for personal and research method biases that may have influenced the conclusions. It was also concerned with the extent to which the study could be replicated with consistent results by other researchers. In quantitative research, this implied making certain that the steps and results could be duplicated consistently. In contrast, as Leung, et al., 2016 pointed out, determining dependability in
qualitative research, particularly with multiple paradigms, could be difficult. However, consistency was frequently stressed in qualitative research.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), trustworthiness in qualitative research included credibility, transferability, conformability, and reliability. Given the lack of established criteria for validity and reliability in qualitative research, demonstrating how the findings were credible, transferable, confirmable, and trustworthy was critical. According to Anderson et al. (2017), researchers were responsible for adhering to common trustworthiness rules to ensure that their work met the needs of research consumers.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined validity as the precision with which the findings accurately reflected the data. It referred to the appropriateness of instruments, processes, and data in the context of qualitative research. According to Leung et al., 2016, validity entailed using “suitable” instruments, methodologies, and data that were in accordance with the study question, technique, design, sample, data analysis, and outcomes. Integrating these notions within the research process was critical to maintaining the study's credibility and validity.

The full picture of any intervention for Autism may not have been gleaned from numbers and quantitative analysis alone. The question of whether autistic individuals valued intervention and whether they found it meaningful and relevant to their lives and aspirations had to be asked. There was no way, using exclusively quantitative methods, to demonstrate the positive or negative impact of an intervention on an autistic individual. When evaluating the efficacy of a program, the focus should not have been primarily on whether or not a person gained a given skill or reduced a specific behavior; rather, the emphasis should have been on whether the experience had a positive or negative impact on the individual's quality of life. Since it was difficult to measure subjective experiences, studies and publications that relied solely on
quantitative analysis typically disregarded this. It would have been beneficial to do qualitative research that used a naturalistic method and tried to figure out how things worked in specific settings, like the “real world” (Patton, 2002, p. 39). Patton (2002) supported this idea that the researcher should have been involved and immersed in the research by saying that things changed in the real world and that a qualitative researcher should have been there to record an event before and after the change.

**Threats to Credibility**

The reliance on data that was self-reported was one factor that could undermine reliability. When answering sensitive survey questions, respondents might not have always been totally candid or precise, as pointed out by Tourangeau and Yan (2007). It was possible for them to mold their responses, embellish them, or omit specifics to conform with perceived expectations or societal norms. When taking into consideration the one-of-a-kind experiences of autistic graduates, it was possible that disclosing personal facts regarding their professional journey could have been more intimidating due to past misconceptions or prejudices they might have encountered. Therefore, while I deeply valued and respected the insights provided by participants, it was essential to approach the data with the understanding that they might occasionally interpret or convey their stories in ways that were influenced by external factors. This echoed the concerns raised by Tourangeau and Yan in their study.

**Summary**

This chapter outlined the research design, participants, procedures, recruitment materials, data collection & analysis, validity, reliability, and credibility of the study. The robustness of the qualitative research study was ensured by a dedicated commitment to methodological rigor. This commitment included maintaining credibility through strict adherence to recognized research
protocols. It also incorporated ongoing self-reflection to reduce the possibility of researcher bias.

Chapter 4 will present the results discovered through the analysis of the data.
Chapter 4

This chapter provides an overview of the findings of this qualitative study on autistic college graduates' motives, experiences, and obstacles as they transitioned into post-baccalaureate employment. The chapter is organized under the two research questions that guided this study. The last section of this chapter presents an overall summary of the findings.

Research Question 1

The first research question asked, “What are common challenges faced by autistic undergraduate alumni in employment after graduation, and how did these alums successfully grapple with these challenges?” Below, I first present three challenges that emerged from participant responses. There was: (1) uncertainty in career choice, (2) anxiety and stress in job pursuits, and (3) insufficient knowledge of student loan obligations. Next, I present four ways in which participants tried to manage or grapple with these challenges: (1) Mentorship and networking, (2) Adaptability and resilience, and (3) Planning for student loans, and (4) Pursuing graduate education. The findings are presented as narrative accounts, highlighting the unique perspectives and insights shared by the participants.

Challenge: Uncertainty in Making the Right Career Choice

The first challenge identified across the data concerned making “the right” career choice. This theme concerns the uncertainties and struggles participants faced when struggling with the decision of which career path to pursue post-graduation. Participants expressed doubts and challenges in aligning their skills, interests, and aspirations with potential career options. Participants described experiencing widespread uncertainty when deciding on their career pathways following degree completion. Participants were uncertain where to work and what careers aligned with their academic preparation. They also were unclear about their personal
preferences in employment. Below, I present excerpts from a handful of participant narratives that paint a picture of the uncertainty that participants felt in making “the right” career choice.

Casey was a 26-year-old, female education major. She shared the following:

You know, making career decisions when I didn't know what to do was like trying to find my way through a maze. I wasn't sure which road was best for me because there were so many to pick from. I learned to trust my gut and face the unknown with courage and determination through it all.

Casey described the decisions that she had to make about career as similar to walking through a maze. In a maze, you have neither foresight nor an overall understanding of the terrain you need to manage. This was like the confusion and lack of overview that participants felt they had to operate with when they were making their first career decisions upon graduation.

This uncertainty was echoed by Kai, a 26-year-old, female, education major. Kai explained:

Uncertainty was like a constant companion on my journey after graduation. I had no idea what direction to go in or what job to choose. I didn't want to let it stop me, though. I saw every choice I made as a chance to learn and grow, and I believed that the right road would show up.

In Kai’s case, the uncertainty accompanied her daily actions and thoughts like a “constant companion.” This sense of constant worry can take quite a toll, as the solution does not seem simple.

Finding a balanced approach to managing the overwhelming uncertainty was described by Jess, a 29-year-old, female, computer science major in her statement. Jess mentioned, “I learned how to make choices that respected both my dreams and my responsibilities, even
though it was hard.” This sentiment was echoed by Elliot, a 23-year-old, nonbinary, psychology major. Elliot commented:

After graduation, uncertainty was always with me. It felt like I was at a fork in the road, not sure which way to go. But I took on the challenge because I saw it as a chance to try new things and figure out what was most important to me in my work.

Both Jess and Elliot exemplify the resilience and adaptability required to navigate the daunting landscape of post-graduation uncertainty, demonstrating a commitment to honoring their aspirations while acknowledging their obligations.

In many instances, participants discovered the uncertainty that comes with making career decisions extended beyond the conventional confines of their majors, prompting them to explore diverse roles aligned with their personal interests, thus opening new possibilities. Jay, a 32-year-old, male, computer science major, shared, “It was about finding the best balance between what I had to do and what I wanted to do.” This comment supported the overall analysis that showed that it was important for participants to strike a balance between pursuing roles aligned with their academic backgrounds and choosing positions that they shared a genuine enthusiasm for.

**Challenge: Anxiety and Stress in Job Pursuits**

The second theme, “Anxiety and Stress Experienced in Job Pursuits,” highlights the significant emotional toll experienced by participants during the job-hunting process. Anxiety, stress, and feelings of being overwhelmed were prevalent as participants navigated through job applications, interviews, and the competitive job market. Throughout the transcripts, a prevalent theme of anxiety and stress in job pursuits among the participants was consistently observed, underscoring the significant challenges encountered by autistic alumni in navigating the post-
graduation employment landscape. Below are excerpts from a handful of narratives that describe the nature of the stress that challenged participants.

Casey described some of the sources of anxiety and stress that she managed. She shared: Going from school to work was so stressful. It was like entering a whole new world. I had to deal with a lot of unknowns and difficulties. I applied for so many jobs and was turned down.

Casey explained that the world of work with like a new arena, with its own rules and patterns. Adjusting from the world of school to this new world caused significant stress and anxiety.

Kai echoed this theme when she explained that “the transition from college to the workforce was anything but smooth sailing.” Kai stated that she “faced countless hurdles, from rejection letters to endless job applications.”

Individuals like Casey and Kai provided nuanced insights into the intricacies of navigating the education sector. They recounted the arduous process of seeking desired positions, noting the necessity to contend with a substantial pool of highly qualified candidates, each vying for the same opportunities.

**Computer Science.** Individual participants who were pursuing the intensely competitive field of computer science also shared genuine and distressing challenges. Both Jess and Jay shared honest and raw accounts of the crippling anxiety they experienced when they started the complicated process of looking for a job, going through tense interviews, and facing the enormous uncertainties of starting their careers. In her moving account, Jess described the intense pressure she faced while searching for computer science-related jobs. She had real concerns about the pre-interview exam. Jess described having an alarming sense that she had been misled about valuable information during the application process. In the same manner, Jay's
story revealed the terrifying weight of expectation he experienced while facing the camera's judgmental stare during performance reviews. These moving testimonies exposed the deep difficulties that caused them anxiety and distress, illuminating the enormous obstacles they had to overcome to succeed professionally. Jess shared the following:

The stress of looking for work in computer science was enormous, and the thought of taking the pre-interview exams in particular caused me to second-guess myself on a regular basis. I began to wonder if this was really my calling because it seemed like with each question a new wave of doubt washed over me.

Jess's testimony highlights the tremendous amount of pressure and self-doubt associated with looking for work in the highly competitive field of computer science. Her story brings to light the mental toll that taking pre-interview exams and the ongoing uncertainty that surround the application process may have. Jess's worry is compounded by the widespread feeling that she has been misled about vital information, which is indicative of the difficult obstacles that are prevalent in a competitive industry.

Jay shared his firsthand experiences within computer science and programming, shedding light on limited job opportunities. He shared his experience within the highly competitive field of UX design. Jay vividly described the intense rivalry and the stress that came with securing a coveted role in a high-demand sector of computer science. Jay described the limited job opportunities and stress he experienced competing in the job market when he shared:

Entering the world of computer science and programming as an autistic college grad was like diving into a shark tank of brainpower and competition. Everywhere you looked, there were geniuses gunning for the same jobs.
It all started with this obsession to understand tech inside out after my first coding class. I was obsessed, at least that’s what my dad said about playing with code and building stuff from scratch. But as I got deeper into coding, algorithms, and all that junk, I felt the weight of competition like never before. Every project felt like a showdown where only the fastest and best would break the code. So much pressure.

In UX design, where you’re mixing tech with like human feels or emotions and stuff, the game was even more intense. It wasn't just about writing killer code or making pretty interfaces; it was about crafting experiences that hit people right in the face. And man, the pressure to bring something new to the table and stand out was insane. I never slept. Trying to snag one of those internships with XXX was like trying to climb freaking Everest. I poured endless hours into leveling up my skills, fine-tuning my portfolio, and practicing for job interviews and tech tests. Did you know there are tests before your interview? Yup, you don’t even get an interview if you can’t get through the tests. Every rejection felt like a gut punch, but it just fueled my fire to prove myself even more.

But hey, in the middle of all the chaos and cutthroat competition, there were moments of pure victory. Landing that dream job was like winning the Super Bowl, only better. It was proof that all the hustle and grind paid off, and it showed I could conquer anything. Maybe even backpacking over Everest.

Jay’s narratives provided vivid accounts of the intense rivalry and the anxiety to secure a coveted role in this high-demand sector, where the demand for skilled professionals often outpaced the available talent pool. Jay was not alone in his stressful experience with limited job opportunities due to specialized fields journey to find employment in a specialized field.

**Other Specialized Fields.** Throughout the transcripts, narratives showcased individuals
who, despite the competitive nature of the job market, overcame their anxiety to be successful in their job pursuits. Casey shared her journey of overcoming anxiety in pursuit of her career goals, stating:

"Entering the education field was terrifying. Each interview was a rollercoaster of emotions - excitement, nervousness, and the looming fear of rejection. When those rejection emails came, I was ashamed. But I refused to let them define me. Instead, I took each setback as a learning opportunity. Eventually, I realized that teaching wasn't the only path to making a difference in education. Through exploration and networking, I found my role in educational. While it wasn't the traditional teaching position I envisioned, it allows me to contribute to the field in meaningful ways and make a positive impact on the students."

Casey's journey epitomized the struggle of a competitive educational job market. She shared her experience with job interviews that were fraught with a mix of emotions, from excitement to nervousness, compounded by the looming fear of rejection. However, rather than letting setbacks define her, Casey viewed them as opportunities for growth and learning. Through perseverance and networking, she discovered an alternative path within the education system that allowed her to contribute meaningfully to the field.

Kai, also an education major, echoed similar sentiments about overcoming anxiety, saying, “Finding a job was nerve-wracking, especially knowing the high demand for teachers. Each rejection email made my heart sink. I knew I was passionate about education, even if teaching didn't work out. Eventually, I found a position that aligned with my strengths, and I am happy.” Kai alongside Casey's journey, highlights the resilience and adaptability inherent in navigating the complexities of specialized fields, demonstrating the diverse pathways individuals
can pursue to make meaningful contributions within their chosen profession.

Elliot's story also highlights the anxiety and stress with job pursuits within a specialized industry. Elliot aggressively sought psychology possibilities with a defined professional goal. Elliot admits that the road was difficult. Elliot shared the following:

The road I've been on since college has been hard, full of big problems and never-ending determination. When I realized that graduate school wasn't what I wanted to do, I started to look for a job that would allow me to do what I enjoy. I applied for about 30 psychology-related jobs. But no matter how hard I looked; I couldn't find a good job in my specialized area because it was so competitive. As I looked through endless job postings and came across tough competition from qualified candidates, the level of competition became clearer. Each rejection made the stress and worry that were already there during my job search even worse. In spite of these problems, I stayed strong. I understood how important it was to be flexible in this tough situation, so I used my transferable skills and looked into other job paths. Even though the challenging job market made things very hard for me, I stayed focused on my goal of moving up in my career and was determined to get past any problems I faced along the way.

Elliot's story emphasizes the major difficulties and strain associated with working in a specialized profession, especially psychology. Though Elliot had a certain goal in mind for their career, they had significant challenges in finding opportunities that matched their experience. Elliot applied to many psychology-related jobs with a strong work ethic, but they were consistently turned down and faced fierce competition. With every setback, the unbearable pressure and uncertainty increased, but Elliot persisted. Elliot recognized the value of flexibility and made use of their transferable skills to explore alternate employment possibilities.
The narratives of the participants showed the significant anxiety and stress that autistic alumni encountered in their job pursuits across various employment sectors. These accounts reveal the formidable challenges and high stakes inherent in specialized industries. Despite these hurdles participants reframed setbacks as opportunities for growth and discovered alternative pathways to career success. Collectively, these stories highlight the resilience and flexibility required to overcome the stress and anxiety related to job pursuits.

Challenge: Insufficient Knowledge of Student Loan Obligations

The financial burdens and decision-making challenges associated with repaying student loans constitute a final challenge that participants described. The autistic alums expressed limited understanding of their loan obligations, which added an additional layer of stress and uncertainty to their post-graduation experiences.

As a reflection of the wider reality of financial difficulties faced after graduation, participants highlighted the financial hardship brought on by student debt. As an example, Casey said, “The burden of student loans is like a constant shadow that hovered over everything. It's not just about getting by; it's also about planning for the future while burdened with debt.”

Kai also added, “I feel like I'm stuck in this cycle of trying to construct a life and paying off loans all the time. It wears me out and alters my behavior, particularly in my professional life.” Kai’s comment evoked a sense of running, but not making substantial progress forward. Jess described a similar dynamic. Jess exclaimed, “I remember having this sinking feeling in my chest every time I made a loan payment; every cash that is deposited into the bank feels like your ambitions are slipping away.” Elliot echoed this sentiment when he emphasized the ubiquitous influence of student debt worry on day-to-day existence. Elliot stated that “the stress of my student loans makes it difficult to focus on anything else. It influences every decision you
make since it's always on your mind.” These moving tales highlight the significant impact that student loan debt has on the participants' psychological and financial health.

Casey, Kai, Jess, and Elliot similarly acknowledged the weight of student loans, recognizing the impact of these financial obligations on their decision-making process, particularly in the preliminary stages of their career. Additionally, Jay's accounts emphasized the financial burden associated with college loans, stressing the importance of managing these financial limitations with employment offers and “pay-scales” while pursuing post-graduate employment prospects. Jay stated:

There is a huge need to weigh your pay scale with your loan repayments and the impact on choosing a job that will support your lifestyle. My parents aren’t paying for my loans, so it is my responsibility to work and pay them.

The depiction of financial worries in this context aligns with the wider socioeconomic difficulties that recent graduates across the country may encounter when dealing with their student loan repayments.

**Strategy: Mentorship and Networking**

Four themes emerged as strategies that autistic alums used to manage the challenges described above. These were: (1) Mentorship and networking, (2) Adaptability and resilience, (3) Planning for student loans, and (4) Pursuing graduate education. Each of these strategies is described here, beginning with the first strategy of mentorship and networking.

As students transitioned into employment post-graduation, their decision-making process involved a thorough exploration of aligning personal interests with the job market and potential career opportunities. While their academic majors during their undergraduate studies provided a foundational knowledge base, participants explained that it was essential for them to consider
broader interests and passions when choosing career roles. Students reflected on their skills, strengths, and areas of expertise developed throughout their academic journeys. In some cases, the ideal jobs extended beyond the conventional boundaries of their majors, and students had to explore diverse roles related to personal interests opened exciting possibilities. It was crucial for the students to weigh the balance between pursuing roles that aligned with their academic majors and choosing positions that sparked genuine enthusiasm and aligned with their long-term career goals. A comprehensive approach to decision-making involved self-assessment, research into potential career paths, and consideration of the transferability of skills across distinct roles, ultimately ensuring a fulfilling and purposeful transition into the professional world.

While their academic majors provided a foundational knowledge base, participants emphasized the importance of considering broader interests and passions when selecting career roles. They reflected on their acquired skills, strengths, and areas of expertise cultivated throughout their academic journey.

All participants actively participated in networking activities, establishing connections with mentors and professionals within their respective fields to gain clarity and direction. Despite facing uncertainty, a persistent and notable pattern of successful problem-solving emerged through networking. The participants demonstrated an elevated level of enthusiasm, proactively engaging in networking endeavors to forge connections with mentors and professionals. This intentional networking not only served as a strategy to navigate uncertainty but also proved instrumental in gaining valuable insights and guidance. Elliot, a 23-year-old nonbinary education major shared, “One of the most impactful things for me was when my professor connected me with a mentor in my field. That guidance was invaluable, and it truly helped me navigate my career choices.” Elliot’s testimony emphasizes the value of mentorship and networking as
essential components of job development, especially when faced with uncertainty. Elliot highlights the transformational effect of mentoring and assistance from seasoned professionals by emphasizing the significant impact of mentorship on their own journey. The act of Elliot's professor putting them in touch with a mentor gave them much-needed clarity and direction in the middle of the uncertainty surrounding post-graduation decision-making, in addition to offering insightful information about their field of choice. Elliot was able to make purposeful and confident decisions about their career thanks to the individualized assistance they received.

Elliot's story is relevant to the larger topic of networking and mentoring because it shows how purposeful relationship-building may be a tactical means of managing uncertainty and promoting career advancement. Elliot's story, along with comparable accounts from other participants, make it clear that networking and mentorship are essential for providing recent graduates with the tools and direction they need to successfully enter the workforce.

Several participants found that networking was an essential tactic for overcoming the uncertainty surrounding their post-graduation employment options throughout their college years. The 26-year-old male history major Aaron emphasized the need of networking, sharing how he aggressively sought out individuals in his intended line of work to obtain advice and insights. Similarly, Jay, a 32-year-old male computer science major, emphasized the value of networking throughout his undergraduate studies by talking about how he actively sought out professors to learn crucial details about his desired future path. Kai, a 26-year-old female education major, agreed, pointing out that networking opportunities and relationships were crucial in determining her career path after graduation. By means of networking and mentorship, participants managed to effectively traverse the uncertainties associated with career decisions by obtaining insightful viewpoints, guidance, and a broader understanding of future professional
opportunities. Through these conversations, they were able to make well-informed judgments about their career pathways and were also better equipped to transition into the professional world.

**Strategy: Adaptability and Resilience**

Successful alumni exhibited remarkable adaptability, embracing diverse job opportunities and leveraging transferable skills in a highly competitive job market. Throughout the transcripts, a consistent theme of resilience and adept critical thinking skills emerged among participants. Adaptation stood out as a pivotal element instrumental in navigating the post-graduation employment search stress experienced by autistic alumni.

The journey through job pursuits often intertwines with anxiety and stress, yet it also illuminates a path marked by adaptability and resilience. Jess's story exemplifies the internal struggle faced by many, as she grappled with the conflicting advice from her institution and her own aspirations. Despite the pressure to conform to the institutional mindset advocating for any job, Jess persisted in seeking alignment between her personal goals and employment choices. Her repeated visits to career counselors mirrored the persistence required to navigate through the maze of uncertainty, reflecting an underlying resilience in the face of institutional pressures.

Similarly, Casey's experience underscores the pervasive influence of institutional guidance on the decision-making process. Encouraged to prioritize short-term employment over long-term fulfillment, Casey faced anxiety familiar to many recent graduates. However, her willingness to adapt to the circumstances and make a compromise demonstrated a resilience born from the necessity of balancing personal aspirations with practical considerations. Although the administrative role diverged from her initial passion for teaching, Casey's ability to adapt to the
situation displays a resilience that enabled her to overcome the anxiety and stress through the challenges of job her pursuits.

Across the narratives, the recurring element of anxiety underscores the complexity of decision-making in the transition from academia to the professional world. However, amidst the uncertainty and stress, a thread of adaptability and resilience emerges. Autistic alumni, like Jess and Casey, demonstrate a capacity to navigate through adversity, seeking alignment between their personal aspirations and employment choices. Their stories serve as a testament to the importance of personalized career support, highlighting the need for guidance that acknowledges individual objectives and desires. It is through adaptability and resilience that autistic alumni grapple with their anxiety and stress in job pursuits, forging their paths towards meaningful and fulfilling careers.

**Strategy: Planning for Student Loan Obligations**

Concluding the discussion, the analysis of student loan issues highlighted the proactive financial planning strategies supported by various alumni. Their narratives highlighted the significance of tackling student loan challenges through strategic management. Jay, reflecting on his experiences, emphasized the importance of creating a detailed budget to allocate funds specifically for student loans, which allowed him to stay on track with his repayment goals. Casey shared similar sentiments, underscoring the necessity of exploring alternative repayment plans to alleviate the burden of student debt. Kai echoed their perspectives, emphasizing the importance of seeking out financial assistance programs to ease the financial strain caused by student loans. Jess, in agreement, emphasized the conscious effort required to effectively manage personal financial responsibilities, including prioritizing debt repayment. Elliot, adding to the discussion, highlighted the importance of long-term financial planning and setting achievable
goals to navigate the challenges of student loan debt successfully. Overall, their collective narratives highlighted a common thread of proactive financial planning, demonstrating resilience and resourcefulness in managing the complexities of student loan debt.

The thematic exploration of financial concerns that come with student loan debt offers nuanced insights into the post-graduation experiences of participants. While student loans present a common challenge, the transcripts illustrate how initiative-taking financial management strategies can empower individuals to navigate these challenges effectively. This understanding underscores the relationship between financial considerations and decision-making processes during the transition into post-graduate life.

**Strategy: Pursuing Graduate Degrees to Compete Effectively**

The pressure to pursue advanced education surfaced as a sub-theme within the broader theme of “Anxiety and Stress Experienced in Job Pursuits.” This particular sub-theme, titled “Greater Emphasis on Graduate Degrees to Compete Effectively,” was prominently featured in the narratives of Elliot and Jess. Their accounts shed light on the prevailing belief within contemporary job markets that obtaining a graduate degree is essential for career advancement and maintaining competitiveness. Elliot and Jess articulated the widespread perception that a graduate degree was not merely advantageous but almost mandatory for standing out among peers and securing desirable employment opportunities. They described feeling compelled to pursue further education as a means of enhancing their marketability and distinguishing themselves in their respective fields. Elliot emphasized the significance of advanced knowledge in fields like computer science, where it could significantly impact career prospects, portraying a sense of urgency driven by the competitive nature of the job market. They spoke of the pressure to pursue advanced education as a means of enhancing their marketability, underscoring the
prevailing expectations within their respective fields adding to the stress of post baccalaureate decision making.

During his interview, Elliot shared,

In today's hyper-competitive job market, it often feels like a graduate degree is the golden ticket to stand out from the crowd. The pressure to pursue further education is real, especially in fields like computer science where advanced knowledge can make or break your career prospects.

Jess’s interview, echoing Elliot's sentiments:

There’s this prevailing belief that without a graduate degree, you're somehow falling behind. It's like there's this unspoken expectation that you need that extra level of expertise to really make an impact in the industry. But it's not just about the knowledge; it's about proving yourself in a sea of equally qualified candidates.

Both Elliot and Jess agreed that the decision to pursue advanced education added another layer of stress to an already daunting post-baccalaureate landscape. “It's like you're constantly weighing the pros and cons,” Elliot explained during his interview. “On one hand, you want to enhance your skills and increase your marketability. In agreement to Elliot, Jess shared, “But on the other hand, you're also juggling student loans, work commitments, and the fear of falling behind.”

During her interview, Jess added, 'It's a tough balancing act. You want to stay competitive, but you also don't want to drown in debt or sacrifice valuable work experience. It's a constant tug-of-war between ambition and practicality.”

Overall, Elliot and Jess's narratives provided valuable insights into the pervasive pressure to pursue advanced education in today's job market, highlighting the complex considerations and
trade-offs involved in navigating post-baccalaureate decision-making. Their experiences underscored the nuanced challenges faced by individuals seeking to advance their careers through further education, offering a deeper understanding of the multifaceted dynamics at play in the pursuit of graduate degrees.

**Summary of Research Question 1**

Three major themes emerged from the examination of participant transcripts, summarizing the difficulties and victories graduates had while navigating the post-graduation job market. The themes that emerged were uncertainty in making the right career choices, anxiety and stress experienced in job pursuits, and insufficient knowledge of student loan obligations. When taken as a whole, these themes provide a thorough grasp of the challenges and successes individuals face in their job paths after earning their degrees. The examination of opportunities for employment brought to light how important networking is for reducing uncertainty about professional decisions. In addition, the analysis of post-graduation stress brought to light the adaptive tactics used in a highly competitive job market. Finally, the conversation on money issues—specifically, student loans—opened my eyes to the complex relationship between money and post-graduate financial planning. Through an examination of these themes, the study offers insightful information on the complex experiences of autistic alumni as the transition into the workforce.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question sought to explore, “What specific experiences during college and post-baccalaureate employment contributed to alumni growth, development, and self-confidence in the realm of career development?” Below I present the four themes that contributed to the realm of career development that emerged from the data. There were: (1)
career growth through mentorship, (2) career readiness through integrated Autism support, and (3) career success through adaptability and resilience. These findings are depicted below through narrative accounts, emphasizing the distinct perspectives and insights conveyed by the participants.

**Career Growth through Mentorship**

The first experience that was identified as contributing to career development was mentorship relationships. Participants enthusiastically highlighted the transformative impact of mentorship during college, underscoring its role in providing guidance and shaping career trajectories. This theme illuminated pivotal experiences that significantly influenced participants' advancement, progress, and self-confidence, particularly within the realm of career development. The subsequent passages comprise a compilation of participant narratives that exemplify a profound gratitude for mentorship, thereby illuminating the profound impact that mentorship had on the college and professional journeys of the participants.

Jay's account illustrated the considerable influence of mentorship throughout his college experience. He recalled a crucial time when his professor provided guidance on the complexities of pursuing a minor in cyber security, which significantly altered the course of his career. Jay stated, “My professor was just as excited as me when he encouraged me to go into cyber security. He told me I was a natural.” This reiterated the significance of mentorship in providing both practical guidance and personal connection, which contributed to Jay's foundational knowledge and enhanced his self-confidence.

Casey described the enduring nature of mentorship post-graduation. She described how a mentor she connected with during an alumni event became a trusted guide in navigating the challenges of transitioning from college to the professional sphere. She shared:
She didn't just give me advice; she became my friend and helped me through the tough parts of job hunting and working with other people with constant support and advice. From a working relationship, our relationship grew into a real friendship based on mutual respect and shared experiences. I've not only found my footing with her help, but I've also learned the lasting power of mentorship to shape my path after college.

In this example, Casey highlighted the significance of long-term mentorship relationships in offering continuous support and guidance even beyond the college setting and career realm into the personal world of a friendship.

Kai's story focused on the impact of mentorships as it related to influencing career decisions. The mentorship she established with an expert in the education field significantly contributed to clarifying her career objectives. She said, “I did not declare my major because I was scared. She told me that we are all scared but that can’t stop you and then she told me she believed in me.” This mentor relationship aided Kai in establishing a major in education and bolstered her determination to pursue a specific career trajectory.

Elliot's account offered valuable understanding of how mentorship went beyond conventional limits to nurture their career growth. Elliot explained:

She has always believed in me even when I gave up on myself. She took me to conferences and introduced me to everyone in the field. She gave me a job to help pay for school. I could call her or go to her office anytime I was feeling overwhelmed or just pissed about something or someone. I wanted to give up and just run away when I failed, and she helped me to see a lesson in it. I don’t know where I would be without her.

In Elliot’s situation, the mentorship relationship went beyond offering professional guidance to include personal growth and techniques for handling stress throughout their post-baccalaureate
period. This mentor offered guidance in many areas of their life to include personal relationships, friendship support, and eventually facilitating a full-time employment opportunity.

Through the illustrative examples presented above, it is apparent that mentorship formed an experience that played a pivotal role in fostering the career advancement of participants, concurrently providing invaluable guidance. The complexity inherent in the relationships between mentors and mentees within both academic and professional realms were vital, reflecting the nuanced dynamics characteristic of such partnerships. These mentorship connections transcended mere instruction, encompassing emotional support, personal development, and strategic career guidance. The multifaceted dimensions of mentorship highlighted its significance in shaping the trajectories of participants.

**Career Readiness through Integrated Autism Support**

The theme of attaining career readiness through integrated Autism support was highlighted through the participants' accounts of invaluable assistance provided by autistic support programs. Throughout the transcripts, participants emphasized the pivotal role of the resources offered within the university’s Autism support program in nurturing their talents, shaping their career trajectories, and navigating the complexities of the job market. Kai’s accentuated the significance of a career counselor visiting her autistic support program to provide guidance on interview skill development, specifically the transformative impact of mock interviews in enhancing her communication skills and bolstering her confidence for real job interviews. Kai reflected on her experiences:

When I think about my journey as an autistic college student, the support I got from the Autism program at the career center was a game-changer. It was like having a superhero team in my corner, helping me to get through the wild world of job hunting. I remember
when a career counselor came to our Autism support program to help us with interview skills. Those mock interviews are a total game-changer. They boosted my confidence big time and helped me with my communication skills. It wasn't just about getting through the interviews though; it was about taking control of my career path. The career center showed me how to set goals and go after them. Looking back, I'm super grateful for the Autism support program allowing them to come to us. They didn't just help me get a job; they helped me find my passion, and my place in the world. And for that, I'll always be thankful.

Kai's journey as an autistic college student was significantly impacted by the support received from the Autism program at the career center, which she likes to having a superhero team by her side. This program was crucial in navigating the challenges of job hunting, providing her with invaluable resources and support. A key aspect of this assistance was the career counseling sessions, particularly the mock interviews, which were transformative for Kai. These sessions not only boosted her confidence but also enhanced her communication skills, helping her to excel in actual job interviews. Beyond the technical aspects of job application, the career center's guidance in goal setting empowered Kai to take control of her career trajectory. Reflecting on her experiences, Kai expresses deep gratitude for the Autism support program, emphasizing its role not just in securing employment, but in discovering her passion and finding her place in the world.

Jess described the importance of career center guidance in meticulously crafting her résumé, emphasizing the tangible benefits derived from this institutional support. Jess shared her experiences:
One highlight from my job search journey that really made a difference was when I was at the career center, feeling stressed about my resume, thinking it was a giant waste of time. They came to our Autism room and asked us if we needed help to go there. I sat in the chair for like five minutes and then they called my name to go to the counselor. I was not ready for how nice and helpful she would be. Within a few minutes she changed the font, margins, and put my education first. Then we talked about the job that I had on campus, and she helped me to expand my role and added all kinds of things that made my resume look great. Honestly, I have to give props to the career center to help me. They didn't just throw some stuff together; they really helped me polish every detail, making sure my resume stood out. And let me tell you, it paid off big time. I started getting more emails and more interviews just from the revisions. It felt like having a secret weapon, boosting my confidence and making me stand out.

Jess's job search journey was significantly enhanced by a pivotal experience at the career center, particularly within the supportive environment of her Autism program. Initially skeptical and stressed about the effectiveness of her resume, Jess's perspective shifted dramatically after a direct encounter with a career counselor. This counselor not only provided immediate, tangible improvements to her resume—such as adjusting the font, margins, and prioritizing her education—but also helped Jess to articulate and expand upon her on-campus job experience, adding depth and appeal to her resume. The personalized attention and meticulous approach of the career center transformed Jess's resume into a powerful tool, increasing her interview invitations and boosting her confidence. Jess attributed a major part of her job search success to the career center's intervention, highlighting the critical role of tailored support.
The acknowledgment of relevant coursework and the crucial collaboration between autistic support services and career centers in the participants’ experiences seamlessly complemented the overarching theme of academic and professional development. This recognition emphasized participants' awareness of these institutional resources as drivers for their employment success, emphasizing the significance of actively engaging with the career center to promote both academic and professional growth.

Participant narratives effectively demonstrated the substantial influence of integrated Autism support on participants' career readiness, emphasizing their recognition of the critical role played by specialized assistance for their specific needs. This theme emerged as a pillar of their narratives, stressing the importance of specialized support in preparing students for the professional obstacles that await them after graduation. The integrated Autism support programs not only met their individual needs, but also provided them with important skills and techniques for success in their chosen careers. These supportive frameworks functioned as a catalyst for personal and professional development.

**Career Success through Adaptability and Resilience**

Throughout the exploration of diverse employment opportunities, autistic alums displayed their adaptability and resilience to achieve career success. The concepts of adaptability and resilience were vividly illustrated by the participants through compelling examples shared during the process. Jay, for instance, reflected on his internship experience, noting, “Moving through my internship taught me how important it is to be adaptable and strong. Whether I had to change careers or overcome challenges, each experience enhanced my ability to adapt and bounce back stronger than before.” Similarly, Casey recalled:
Looking at different job opportunities wasn't just about finding the right one; it was also about learning how to deal with new situations and challenges. I learned to be stronger in the face of uncertainty from every event, whether it was a success or a failure. Kai emphasized the value of being receptive to different career paths, stating, “Being open to different career paths helped me develop a flexible set of skills and a flexible way of thinking.” These testimonies highlight the profound impact of adaptability and resilience in navigating the complexities of the professional landscape, demonstrating the participants' ability to thrive amidst uncertainty and change.

Jay's journey emphasized the concept of flexibility throughout his time as an undergraduate. He describes his internship experience as being a “learning experience.” He also shared his fear of disclosure and the need for accommodation in the workplace. He characterized his decision to disclosure as an act of empowerment achieved through necessity and adversity. Jay described his experience:

I also had a hard time deciding whether to tell people at work that I have Autism. It wasn't simple to decide. I struggled with the fear of judgment and discrimination, but ultimately, I realized that disclosure was necessary for me to receive the accommodations I needed to succeed. Telling people, I have Autism was a turning point for me. It was an act of empowerment. It gave me the chance to fully accept who I am and speak up for myself at work. It wasn't fun, but it was an important step on my way to accepting myself.

This opportunity that began as a setback played a significant role in Jay’s achievement in the professional sphere. This instance exemplified how Jay's adaptability played a pivotal role in his post-graduate career, leading to his success.
Casey's story enhanced the theme by recounting her triumphs in overcoming social anxiety while searching for employment after graduating. Despite her initial difficulty, these trials functioned as intense tests for Casey's ability to recover, ultimately strengthening her belief in herself. Casey's story illustrated how confronting and overcoming social anxiety difficulties played a crucial role in developing adaptability and resilience. Casey detailed her experiences:

When I think back on my life after college, it's been quite an adventure. I wanted to be a teacher, but life had other ideas. I finally got a job at a non-profit childcare center, and you know what? It worked out great in the end. But getting here wasn't easy, especially with my social anxiety looming over me. It felt like this huge barrier between me and my goals. Every interview, every networking event, it was like my anxiety was this heavy weight holding me back. I started small, pushing myself out of my comfort zone one step at a time. It was hard, I won't lie. There were moments when I wanted to give up, when the fear felt overwhelming. But each time I faced my anxiety, I came out stronger. Now, I won't pretend that my anxiety magically disappeared and Covid really almost put me over because I didn't want to die, and my parents are old. It's still there, lurking in the background sometimes. But what's changed is how I respond to it. Instead of letting it hold me back, I've learned to meditate and move forward. Working at the childcare center has been a blessing in disguise. And for that, I'm truly grateful.

Casey's story highlights her triumph over social anxiety, which initially posed significant barriers to her career aspirations. Despite facing daunting challenges, Casey's perseverance and determination enabled her to confront her anxiety and gradually expand her comfort zone. Each trial served as a test of her resilience, strengthening her belief in herself. Similarly, Kai's testimony highlights the importance of flexibility and strategic planning in the job search.
process. She described her deliberate efforts to explore diverse employment opportunities within the educational system, incorporating non-profit and private sectors after encountering rejection from the public school system.

During her interview, Kai shared:

Oh, yeah, my journey after graduation has been quite a ride. I really had my heart set on working in the public school system, you know. But when that didn't work out, I knew I had to pivot to something else. So, I started researching all kinds of opportunities within the educational field. I wanted to explore every option out there. It was like mapping out a game plan, figuring out how to incorporate non-profit and private sectors into the mix and searching Indeed and LinkedIn to find something. I wanted to make sure I wasn't putting all my eggs in one basket, especially after facing rejection so many times from the public schools. It was tough, but I knew I had to stay flexible and open. And it paid off. I ended up finding this amazing opportunity in the non-profit area that was perfect for me. It wasn't what I initially envisioned, but it's turned out to be such a rewarding experience. So yeah, my journey has definitely taught me the importance of flexibility. Sometimes you gotta roll with the punches and adapt to whatever life throws your way. And hey, who knows...You might just end up somewhere even better than you imagined.

Elliot’s interview echoed Kai’s sentiments. Elliot explained:

I must have applied for more than fifty jobs, and each one that didn't work out hurt more than the last. I kept having doubts and not knowing if I'd ever get a job. It felt like I was always up against the wall and getting desperate. So, I applied to like everything. But I didn't let it define me. I kept going and kept going even when things got hard. Regardless of the problems, it was a path of personal growth that taught me that every
rejection was a chance to learn and grow. I wouldn’t have this job if I didn’t have this experience.

Kai and Elliot's ability to adjust to new circumstances is clearly demonstrated as they successfully navigated through uncertainty, ultimately altering their career objectives, and emerging with an increased feeling of resilience and self-confidence. Kai and Elliot skillfully maneuvered through uncertain times, demonstrating their amazing ability to adjust to unforeseen circumstances. Even though they encountered many obstacles and disappointments along their professional journeys, they demonstrated an amazing capacity to change course and reevaluate their goals, which finally resulted in a redefining of their career objectives.

These examples not only highlighted the participants' ability to adapt to adversity but also highlighted the pivotal role that resilience played in personal and professional development. By confronting and overcoming challenges head-on, the participants not only demonstrated their capacity for growth but also forged a path towards success rooted in resilience and determination. Building upon the insights shared by the participants, it becomes evident that adaptability and resilience served as indispensable assets in navigating the ever-evolving landscape of employment.

**Summary of Research Question 2**

Three overarching themes emerged from the examination of participants' transcripts, encapsulating experiences that significantly contributed to career development. These themes include (1) career growth through mentorship, (2) career readiness through integrated Autism support, and (3) career success through adaptability and resilience.

Career growth through mentorship played a pivotal role in shaping participants' career trajectories, with mentors providing invaluable guidance and support throughout alumni’s
college journey and beyond. Participants emphasized the enduring influence of mentors in
influencing career choices, offering valuable advice, and fostering holistic growth.

Furthermore, integrated Autism support programs were identified as essential in
preparing participants for the workforce. Through resources such as mock interviews and resume
development sessions, participants gained crucial skills and the confidence necessary for
successful job placement. Personalized guidance tailored to their individual needs further
enhanced their readiness for the professional realm.

Lastly, participants highlighted the significance of adaptability and resilience in
achieving career success. They demonstrated the ability to navigate obstacles, confront fears, and
pursue opportunities beyond their initial scope. By adapting to changing circumstances and
persisting through challenges, participants experienced personal and professional growth.

Overall, these three themes illuminate the nuanced journey of autistic alumni as they
transition into the workforce. By leveraging mentorship, personalized Autism resources,
adaptability, and resilience, participants effectively charted their course to success in the
professional world.

**Summary**

Examining the participant transcripts for both research questions revealed a wide range of
events that influenced the career paths of the participants. Resilience and flexibility were key
themes that repeatedly surfaced during the investigations, playing crucial roles in how
participants managed intricate obstacles in the workplace. When faced with uncertainty in their
career paths, the pressures of a competitive job market, or financial concerns, successful alumni
demonstrated impressive adaptability, leading to success in challenging circumstances.
Furthermore, the study explored mentorship highlighting the significance of personal networks in influencing participants' paths. Having a mentor can have a long-lasting impact, providing valuable support after graduation and offering guidance throughout college. At the same time, the focus on Autism support highlighted the importance of personalizing career readiness to ensure equity in preparing students for future employment. The findings of this study illuminated a spectrum of dynamics contributing to the overall career advancement of autistic graduates, shedding light on the intricate interplay between individual and institutional supports in facilitating their professional development.

Chapter 5 delves deeper into the detailed narratives of two participants, Aaron, and Avery, providing a nuanced exploration of their unique experiences and perspectives. By centering on their stories, this research seeks to highlight the personalized nature of career development and the specific strategies that enabled these individuals to navigate their paths successfully.
Chapter 5

In this chapter, the lives of two extraordinary individuals, Aaron, and Avery, are explored to unveil the complexities of their experiences as autistic alumni. First, statistical evidence is provided to showcase the rarity of their situations, offering context for their remarkable achievements within the broader landscape of educational attainment among autistic individuals. Following this, Aaron and Avery's personal and professional achievements underwent a meticulous analysis, guided by the overarching themes identified in participants transcripts. This thorough exploration aimed to glean valuable insights into their remarkable accomplishments. By delving into the intricacies of their experiences, this examination sought to uncover the specific factors that contributed to their success. The concluding section of this chapter presents an overall summary of the findings.

Statistics from sources such as the National Center for Education Statistics (2023) and the Education Data Initiative (2024) shed light on the challenges faced by autistic individuals in accessing and completing higher education. It was revealed that only 35% of all autistic high school graduates choose to pursue higher education, and within this group, a mere 33% successfully earn their degrees. These numbers underscore the broader issue of college dropout rates for individuals with Autism. A comprehensive analysis by National Center for Education Statistics (2023), revealed that as many as 32.9% of undergraduates fail to complete their programs, with the dropout rate at 25.7%, while up to 40% of all undergraduate students discontinue their studies before graduation. Notably, the National Center for Education Statistics (2023) listed the return rate to college for those who drop out at a mere 2-3%. Given this information, it becomes imperative to recognize and celebrate the achievements of returning autistic undergraduate students like Aaron.
Furthermore, findings from the Education Data Initiative (2024) indicate that an only 14% of the United States population aged twenty-five and older have completed advanced education, such as a master’s degree, professional degree, or doctorate. Within this already limited demographic, candidates who are both autistic and have attained an advanced degree represent an even smaller portion. As such, these individuals like Avery, are indeed rare and warrant acknowledgment for their exceptional accomplishments in overcoming significant educational barriers.

Aaron's journey celebrates overcoming shared challenges encountered by autistic undergraduate alumni in post-graduation employment. From navigating social dynamics in the workplace to addressing sensory concerns and executive functioning, Aaron’s narrative offers profound insights into overcoming obstacles faced such as dropping out of college and the pragmatic strategies employed to overcome them. Additionally, Aaron's experiences provided important insights into the importance of self-advocacy, resilience, and mentorship in navigating the complexities of the professional realm.

Similarly, Avery's narrative celebrates the unique perspective on the transition into higher education, graduate school, and the subsequent journey into the workforce. Avery's story illuminates the resilience and adaptability required to navigate the higher education landscape. Through networking, self-advocacy, and perseverance, Avery successfully navigated the complexities of college life and transitioned into a fulfilling career path that aligns with his passions and strengths. The narratives below have been anonymized and amalgamated with similar narratives shared by other study participants to both protect individual anonymity and secure confidentiality while also providing an important glimpse into the experiences of the very few autistic alumni who find career success after college.
Aaron's remarkable journey from childhood to adulthood highlights his unwavering resilience and remarkable ability to adapt in the face of challenging circumstances. Aaron's childhood in Pennsylvania was shadowed by suspicions of Autism, which had been suspected since he was a baby. This suspicion was finally confirmed when he received an official diagnosis at the age of eight. Despite facing initial obstacles, Aaron demonstrated exceptional academic performance throughout high school, consistently achieving outstanding grades. He also earned membership in the prestigious National Honor Society, displaying his dedication and commitment to his studies. Additionally, Aaron was able to build a strong network of supportive friends who shared his passion for learning and personal growth.

First College Experience

As Aaron embarked on his college journey, he set his sights on attending a prestigious Ivy League institution, buoyed by his exceptional academic achievements. However, despite his impeccable grades, Aaron faced the disappointment of not being accepted and instead enrolled in a small private college. Unbeknownst to him, this institution lacked the resources tailored to support individuals on the Autism spectrum. Despite this unexpected turn of events, Aaron approached this transition into academia as an opportunity for personal growth and self-discovery, embracing the challenge of navigating this unfamiliar environment independently. Aaron shared the following, “The college transition was also very difficult for me. I would forget about or procrastinate on assignments, and I started getting bad grades in classes.”

This acknowledgment of Aaron's initial adjustment to college sheds light on the numerous barriers that students typically encounter throughout the crucial transition to college life. It also highlights the significant difficulties that are inherent in adjusting to new academic
and social situations. Aaron's open and honest reflection highlights the significance of recognizing and resolving the myriad of challenges that students face.

Realizing the pivotal role of support services in his academic journey, Aaron made the difficult decision to withdraw from college after facing academic challenges and receiving grades that fell short of his expectations. This decision marked a significant turning point in Aaron's life, as he took proactive steps to reassess his educational path and explore alternative avenues for personal and academic growth. Despite the setback, Aaron remained resilient and determined, demonstrating his commitment to overcoming obstacles and pursuing success on his own terms. He shares the following:

Having never failed any classes, I was ashamed. I knew that I would have to withdraw when I found out that I was getting D's and constantly requesting extensions on assignments that I was not even passing. So, after my sophomore year I decided to withdraw from college completely because I wasn't sure if college was even for me.

Aaron revealed a challenging period marked by academic struggle and self-doubt in his reflection. Despite his previous academic success, the experience of receiving low grades and struggling with assignments led to feelings of shame and uncertainty about his academic path. Faced with the realization that his current approach to college was not yielding the desired results, he made the difficult decision to withdraw from college entirely after his sophomore year. This decision reflected his uncertainty about whether college was the right fit for him at that time.

*From Setbacks to College Success*

The pivotal decision to withdraw from college and transition into part-time employment proved to be a transformative learning experience for Aaron. Through this experience, Aaron
gained valuable insights into his own aspirations and career goals, realizing that settling for “just any job” was not aligned with his long-term vision for his future. Within six months of taking on part-time work, Aaron made the proactive decision to transfer to a larger public university that offered specialized support for individuals with Autism and provided the necessary accommodations to facilitate his academic and career aspirations. This transition represented a significant milestone in Aaron's journey, marking his commitment to seeking out environments that fostered his personal and academic growth, and setting the stage for his continued success in higher education and beyond. Aaron explained, “I was looking for a school that specifically had an autistic support program because my old college did have a disability office but the staff there didn't really have any specialized experience in Autism and didn't understand my needs.”

Aaron's search for a suitable educational environment was driven by a need for specialized support tailored to his Autism. Dissatisfied with the generic disability services offered at his previous college, which lacked expertise in Autism and failed to address his unique needs, he sought out institutions with dedicated autistic support programs. This decision reflected his recognition of the importance of receiving specialized assistance that aligned with his specific challenges and requirements.

**College Autism Support Services**

Aaron managed the diverse environment of campus life with ease for the rest of his undergraduate time at a new university that provided personalized support for autistic students. Aaron embraced the academic rigors and adult duties, and proactively used the available accommodations, particularly those related to executive functioning, to improve his learning experience and general well-being. With a strong commitment to academic achievement, Aaron accepted the study requirements and coursework demands, utilizing the available support
resources to efficiently manage his academic workload and negotiate the intricacies of higher education. Furthermore, Aaron's proactive attitude to seeking help and accessing resources demonstrated his resilience and will to excel in his academic activities, establishing him for future growth and achievement. Aaron shared, “I was getting my work done. All the free time between and after classes were budgeted. I had support in creating a schedule to get my work done and study.”

Aaron emphasized his disciplined approach to managing his academic responsibilities, highlighting his meticulous planning and utilization of available resources. By carefully budgeting his time between and after classes, he ensured that he could complete his assignments and study effectively. Additionally, he acknowledged the support he received in devising a structured schedule to accommodate his workload and study requirements. This insight underscores Aaron's proactive attitude towards academic success and his recognition of the importance of effective time management in achieving his goals.

“Accepting academic support while attending college was pivotal for me,” Aaron reflected. “It helped me navigate coursework, understand complex concepts, and ultimately achieve academic success.” Pausing, he continued, “But it's important to recognize that college isn't just about academics. It's also about preparing for the workforce.” He also added, “That's why I made sure to focus on developing practical skills with my academics.” Aaron's journey highlighted the importance of balancing academic support with efforts to cultivate essential employment and communication skills, ensuring a well-rounded college experience.

Academic support provided invaluable assistance in navigating coursework, understanding complex concepts, and achieving academic success, however it was essential to complement this support with the development of practical communication skills. Building
effective communication skills, networking abilities, and problem-solving skills not only
enhanced Aaron’s employability but also prepared him for the challenges and opportunities in
the future. Therefore, embracing both academic support and building communication skills was
crucial for Aaron to achieve a well-rounded college experience.

**Getting Involved**

Participating actively in numerous campus clubs, obtaining an on-campus job, making
significant contacts with professors, actively participating in networking events, and immersing
himself in social gatherings within his autistic program were all important aspects of Aaron's
academic adventure. These different activities provided him with not just social and emotional
support, but also vital skills for personal and professional development. Aaron improved his
overall employability by actively participating in campus life, cultivating strong interpersonal
ties, and honing crucial communication skills. Furthermore, these experiences helped Aaron
build a sense of belonging within the university community, which created a supportive
atmosphere for his academic and personal development. He described this in detail:

I loved that I made friends at work, talked to my professors, and had things to do besides
go to class. I was making those connections, and it is so important for all students. But I
recognize that when you struggle with certain things, having those connections and the
relationship that you build with professors and having people that are just like you in a
designated program is critical. It helped me to be successful. It changed my life.

In his detailed reflection, Aaron emphasized the significance of building connections both at
work and within his academic community. He highlighted the importance of forging
relationships with professors and peers, particularly within a designated program tailored to
individuals facing similar challenges. Aaron recognized these connections as crucial to his
success, acknowledging their transformative impact on his life. By fostering a supportive network of mentors and peers, Aaron emphasized how these relationships contributed to his personal and academic growth, ultimately shaping his journey towards success.

The experiences played a pivotal role in not only fostering Aaron’s academic advancement but also in cultivating vital networking abilities essential for his future career. Additionally, his engagement with an on-campus job proved to be profoundly influential in facilitating his transition into the workforce. Aaron shared:

My job was especially impactful on my journey because there was a weeklong orientation beforehand, so I knew exactly what to expect. There were a lot of team building exercises, and it was just very casual and laid back, but it provided a great experience. I made friends, and having fun while you work really helps you to connect to coworkers. I loved it.

Aaron reflected on the significance of his job experience, particularly highlighting the impact of the weeklong orientation preceding his employment. This orientation not only familiarized him with the job expectations but also fostered a sense of camaraderie through team-building exercises in a relaxed atmosphere. Aaron emphasized the importance of this experience in forming connections with coworkers, as it facilitated the development of friendships and contributed to a positive work environment. Overall, Aaron highlighted the value of a supportive and engaging onboarding process in fostering workplace satisfaction and social integration.

**Mentorship**

Aaron's journey to success continued through mentorships that played a crucial role in aligning his employment goals with his academic endeavors. Aaron's experiences inside and outside of the classroom highlighted the importance of having a trusted mentor. The relationship
he described helped him to successfully navigate unfamiliar environments and take advantage of various employment opportunities that were specifically aligned to his major. Aaron’s thoughts on mentorship:

Mentorship was very impactful. My professor was very well connected in the community and the field in general. He helped me inside the classroom to build practical skills like museum exhibit design elements. Most importantly, when he retired, he made sure to provide me with three additional connections in the field. He personally introduced me and helped me to share my Autism diagnosis with them. This led to a volunteer opportunity and then my first internship.

Aaron emphasized the substantial influence of mentorship on his career path, emphasizing the immeasurable assistance and direction he received from his professor. In addition to teaching practical skills in museum exhibit design, Aaron's professor utilized his vast network to establish important contacts within the profession. After retiring, the professor continued to support Aaron by offering three extra introductions, which allowed Aaron to openly share his Autism diagnosis with confidence and obtain valuable opportunities.

Employment Journey after Graduation

Aaron's life underwent significant upheaval immediately following graduation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic immediately after graduation, Aaron's life experienced substantial hardship. As a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, Aaron was pushed to reevaluate his career direction and investigate alternatives due to the unexpected problems it presented. His enthusiasm for museum studies flourished while he was volunteering and working on his internship. He was driven by a strong aspiration to make a significant contribution to the gathering, organizing, and sharing of historical accounts but this was contingent upon access to
specific environments. Unfortunately, Aaron's objectives were put on hold by the closure of museums and historical places due to the pandemic closures. As a result, he faced a critical decision point where he had to reevaluate his career goals and explore different paths. At this turning point in his journey, Aaron decided to pursue new professional opportunities outside of the museum field, departing from his original career path. Aaron described this journey:

I graduated May 2020 in the midst of COVID and Museums where closed or not hiring or laying people off. I had to make a decision to work in retail or not work. There were only part time and entry level stuff. I had my degree so eventually I got promoted to a supervisor, but I was really being overworked and it wasn't really what I wanted to do. So, I kind of just started looking anywhere.

Aaron reflected on his post-graduation experience amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted the job market, particularly in the museum sector where he aspired to work. Faced with limited options, Aaron had to weigh between accepting a position in retail or remaining unemployed. Despite initially securing a supervisor role, he found the work unfulfilling and recognized the need for a change.

Following a string of disappointments in his retail supervisor role, Aaron displayed remarkable resilience and perseverance as he searched for a career path that better utilizes his innate interests, education, and strengths. He began by searching company websites where he believed he would like to work instead of job boards and found an opening. Aaron shared:

I had to take the chance. I thought that if I have a little bit of experience in this field, maybe I can show them that I can do this. So, I put my application in, my now boss gave me a test to use the software they use at the company to try to recreate a product. I taught myself the program because I had never used it. I sent the test project back to him and he
said that I did really good. He also said that he interviewed a bunch of other people including trained specialists and that I did the best on this test of them all. Then he hired me.

Aaron recounted taking a leap of faith in pursuit of a career opportunity, driven by the belief that even with minimal experience, he could demonstrate his capabilities. He seized the chance to apply for a position in a field he was unfamiliar with, impressing his prospective employer by self-learning the required software and excelling in a test project. Despite competing against trained specialists, Aaron's dedication and performance stood out, ultimately leading to his successful hiring. This anecdote underscores the importance of initiative, adaptability, and self-motivation in navigating the job market and seizing career opportunities.

Aaron's journey into his role as assistant product manager exemplifies his adaptability and perseverance in overcoming professional challenges. Upon entering his dream company, Aaron encountered the need to familiarize himself with digital design software, a crucial skill for his position. Undeterred by the unfamiliarity of the task, Aaron embarked on a journey of self-study, dedicating countless hours to mastering the intricacies of the software. Despite initial setbacks and frustrations, Aaron's relentless persistence paid off as he gradually became proficient in using the software, showcasing his ability to learn and adapt in dynamic professional environments.

Furthermore, Aaron's eagerness to tackle new challenges and expand his skill set was evident in his proactive approach to seeking out opportunities beyond his original career goals. By taking on new challenges and embracing opportunities for growth, Aaron not only showcased his adaptability but also positioned himself for success in his career trajectory.
Overall, Aaron's journey serves as a testament to the power of adaptability, perseverance, and proactive decision-making in navigating the transition from academia to the workforce. His willingness to confront challenges head-on, coupled with his relentless pursuit of growth and development, highlights the importance of resilience and determination in achieving professional success.

*Avery’s Story*

The transcripts offer a glimpse into Avery's inspiring narrative, unfolding in the nurturing environment of a close-knit community in a nearby state. Growing up surrounded by the support of his parents and a caring younger sister, Avery's journey embodies the significance of familial encouragement in navigating neurodiversity. His journey towards self-acceptance took a significant turn upon discovering his Asperger's Syndrome diagnosis. This pivotal realization not only marked a profound moment of personal growth for Avery but also symbolized a transformative journey of self-discovery and empowerment across his academic and personal spheres.

Avery's journey of self-discovery was deeply influenced by the timing and manner in which he received his diagnosis. Reflecting on his experience, Avery disclosed that he was informed about his diagnosis of Asperger's Syndrome when he was 12 years old. However, he revealed that suspicions about his condition had arisen much earlier, around the age of 10, during his fourth-grade year. Avery disclosed the following:

> I was told about my diagnosis when I was 12 years old... They suspected it early into fourth grade. But I was not told. So, I think I was like 10. I can now say that I have Aspergers, but they changed the diagnosis in medical terms. I think it is called Autism 1 now.
Despite these early suspicions, Avery was not informed of his diagnosis at the time, leaving him to navigate his neurodiversity without clarity or understanding. It was not until later that he was able to fully acknowledge and embrace his identity, coming to terms with the fact that Asperger's Syndrome had been reclassified under the broader umbrella of Autism Spectrum Disorder. This journey of recognition and acceptance highlights Avery's resilience and determination to embrace his neurodiversity, despite the initial lack of awareness and understanding surrounding his diagnosis.

**High School Journey**

Avery was provided with a variety of opportunities for academic and social development, to make the most of his time spent in high school. Two unique educational programs were offered within his school system to cater to students with a variety of interests. One of these programs was developed for people who preferred the arts, and the other was geared toward those who were interested in sports. This decision was a significant turning point in Avery's personal agency and empowerment. He made the conscious decision to participate in the program that was focused on sports, even though he was not an athlete. By making this decision, Avery not only demonstrated his independence in determining the direction of his educational journey, but it also highlighted his willingness to venture outside his comfort zone and explore new possibilities. Avery shared:

Okay, so my high school experience was a little different. We got to choose between two high schools. One was North and known as the Artsy High School and the other was South and that was known as the Sportsy High School. I'm not into sports but I went to the sports one in the south. Just because I liked that school better. I think that during my first year of high school, I was a little lost. I didn't really know why but I struggled. But
by sophomore year, I was like, I have so many friends here. And then by senior year I was happy. I wasn't popular, but I was so respected. Avery reflected on his high school experience, highlighting the unique choice between two distinct schools and his decision to attend the one known for its focus on sports, despite his personal interests lying elsewhere. Initially feeling adrift during his first year. However, by his sophomore year, he found a sense of belonging and camaraderie among his peers.

By the time he reached senior year, Avery's journey was characterized by a profound sense of contentment and fulfillment. Although he did not consider himself popular, he deeply valued the respect he earned from his peers. This transformation showcased Avery's resilience and adaptability, as he navigated the challenges of high school with determination and optimism, ultimately emerging with a strong sense of self-assurance and accomplishment.

*Undergraduate College Journey*

Transitioning into higher education marked a significant milestone for Avery, filled with excitement and promise. Avery's undergraduate college journey represented a significant milestone in his life, brimming with anticipation and potential. Transitioning into higher education, Avery faced a pivotal decision among several universities that had accepted him. Despite having numerous options, Avery made a deliberate choice to attend a college that offered robust support services for individuals on the Autism spectrum. He discussed the moment that he made his decision in the statement, “I went to the campus, and I was standing in the parking lot, and I was like, I can see myself going here. I actually said to myself that I am doing this. I am going to college.” The decision made that day was a testament to his initiative-taking approach to his academic journey, as he prioritized access to resources that would cater to his unique needs and ensure a supportive learning environment.
Throughout Avery's undergraduate journey, he encountered various challenges that tested his resilience and perseverance. Despite the overall success of his academic pursuits, Avery faced a significant obstacle during his third semester, namely a conflict with his roommate. This situation arose from differences in schedules, study habits, and personal boundaries, creating tension and discomfort for both parties involved. However, Avery approached the conflict with maturity and determination, seeking proactive solutions to resolve the issues at hand. Despite his initial discomfort with confrontation, Avery found the courage to address the situation directly, initiating open and honest communication with his roommate. With the support of his graduate advisor, Avery and his roommate established a roommate agreement, outlining mutually agreed-upon guidelines to foster a harmonious living environment. Through this process, Avery demonstrated remarkable growth and self-advocacy, navigating interpersonal challenges with grace and determination. Avery shared some of the details of his roommate experience:

My sophomore year roommate was hell. We didn't really like each other and it's like he would play video games until 3 am and I would have the 8 am classes. It was so awkward to confront him. I am not a confrontational person, and it was a struggle to get through. I am so proud of myself for finally confronting him. We worked with the GA and had a roommate agreement. This helped me and I survived the rest of the year.

Reflecting on his experiences, Avery shared insights into the difficulties he faced with his roommate and the strategies he employed to overcome them. Despite the initial discomfort and awkwardness of confronting his roommate, Avery persevered, driven by a desire to create a positive and supportive living environment conducive to academic success. By collaborating with his roommate and seeking guidance from his graduate advisor, Avery was able to navigate the challenges of roommate conflict and emerge stronger and more resilient as a result. These
experiences served as valuable lessons in communication, conflict resolution, and self-advocacy, equipping Avery with the skills and confidence needed to overcome future challenges and thrive in his academic and personal pursuits.

Navigating college life presented Avery with a myriad of expectations, from excelling academically to forging meaningful friendships and participating in social events. Despite the pressures he faced, Avery embraced each challenge with determination and optimism, recognizing the opportunities for personal growth and development that college offered. Whether attending classes, engaging in extracurricular activities, or connecting with classmates, Avery approached every task with a positive attitude and a strong commitment to success.

Despite initially struggling to find his place on campus, Avery's persistence paid off, and by his sophomore year, he had established a supportive group of friends who became his study buddies and offered encouragement throughout his academic journey. Avery described his journey:

Then there was the pressure to do well in school and finding friends was challenging, too. I was in my sophomore year before I had a group of friends. But these friends were and still are great. We all became study buddies and encouraged each other to do well. It helped all of us to be successful academically and reduced the stress because I always had a friend to study with.

These friendships not only provided a source of camaraderie and support but also contributed to Avery's academic success by fostering a collaborative and motivating environment. By embracing the college experience with an open mind and a willingness to step outside his comfort zone, Avery laid the foundation for lasting friendships, academic achievement, and cherished memories that would shape his transition into the workforce and beyond.
Early Employment Experiences

Transitioning into early employment experiences, Avery's professional journey during college unfolded beyond conventional academic avenues, as he embraced internships guided by a trusted faculty mentor. Avery’s varied experiences were detailed here:

In college, I had a work study jobs but it wasn’t just about making money—it was about learning and growing too. One of my favorites was working at the writing center on campus that required me to monitor the clubs. I helped students with all kinds of papers and assignments, no matter the subject and got to meet people at clubs and events. I met my best friend, who is still my best friend. Plus, I picked up some important skills like talking to people, managing my time, and working in a team, which have come in handy in my career since then.

During his college years, Avery engaged in work-study opportunities that extended beyond mere financial gain, serving as valuable learning experiences. Notably, Avery cherished his time working at the campus writing center, where he not only assisted students with various academic tasks but also cultivated connections through club involvement. This role proved instrumental in developing essential skills such as effective communication, time management, and teamwork—skills that have continued to benefit him throughout his career journey. Additionally, Avery formed a lasting friendship during this time, highlighting the personal growth and meaningful connections fostered through his college employment experiences.

The various internship experiences provided Avery with invaluable opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge gained from coursework to real-world scenarios, fostering the development of practical skills essential for sustainable professional success. Simultaneously, active participation in extracurricular activities enriched Avery's skill set, nurturing leadership
qualities, honing interpersonal skills, and fostering collaboration and innovation. One notable role Avery undertook was working at the writing center on campus, where he not only assisted students with various papers and assignments but also monitored clubs and events, leading to the formation of lasting friendships. Through these diverse experiences, Avery gained multifaceted skills and a holistic understanding of the professional landscape, laying a solid foundation for a vibrant and rewarding career journey ahead.

Mentorship

Mentorship also played a pivotal role in Avery's college journey, offering him crucial guidance, support, and inspiration as he navigated the complexities of higher education and prepared for his future. Through interactions with mentors such as his advisor, Avery gained invaluable insights into academic pursuits, career paths, and personal growth opportunities. Avery explained:

So, I had my advisor, and she was amazing and went above and beyond. I liked her a lot and was grateful for her guidance. She was just one of the people who made a difference in my life. She trusted and respected me. For the first time ever someone who was older than me asked me questions and valued my response. I know that sounds strange, but she changed my life.

Avery shared that his mentor not only provided practical advice and assistance but also served as a role model, offering encouragement and motivation during times of uncertainty or challenge that comes with the higher education landscape. By fostering meaningful connections and relationships, this form of mentorship helped Avery build confidence, develop essential skills, and make informed decisions about his educational and career goals. Moreover, these mentorship experiences equipped Avery with a supportive network of individuals invested in his
success and well-being, extending beyond the college years and into his professional journey after graduation.

**Graduate School Journey**

Avery's transition after his baccalaureate graduation was marked by a blend of excitement and determination, as evidenced by his decision to attend graduate school just eight months after receiving his baccalaureate degree. Equipped with a strong academic background and enhanced by a variety of work experiences accumulated over his undergraduate years, Avery entered this new stage of his education with a clear sense of purpose and confidence. His active participation in the Autism program on campus as a graduate assistant demonstrated his dedication to both professional and personal development. It also gave him the chance to take on a mentorship role, offering advice and encouragement to other students that were on similar paths. This pivotal transition period epitomized Avery's indomitable spirit and his unyielding dedication to academic excellence and community engagement, setting the stage for a transformative chapter in his life's narrative. Avery explained:

I met with my graduate advisor, and I knew what I wanted to do. I am strong academically and I was ready for more. I had a graduate assistantship that allowed me to become a mentor at the Autism program on campus. It was my turn to support and encourage.

Avery recounted a pivotal moment in his academic journey where he met with his graduate advisor and solidified his career aspirations. Recognizing his academic prowess and readiness for further challenges, Avery embraced a graduate assistantship opportunity that enabled him to mentor students in the campus Autism program. This experience marked a
significant transition for Avery, as he shifted from being a mentee to a mentor, embodying a role of support and encouragement for others within the Autism community.

Embarking on his graduate school journey just eight months after completing his bachelor's degree, Avery's transition reflected a blend of enthusiasm and determination. Armed with a robust academic foundation and enriched by diverse work experiences acquired during his undergraduate years, Avery entered this new phase of his education with unwavering purpose and confidence. His active involvement in the Autism program on campus as a graduate assistant not only supported his commitment to professional and personal growth but also afforded him the opportunity to assume a mentorship role, offering guidance and inspiration to fellow students navigating similar paths. This pivotal transition period epitomized Avery's resilience and steadfast commitment to academic excellence and community engagement, laying the groundwork for a transformative chapter in his life's journey. Through his graduate advisor meetings and his role as a graduate assistant, Avery demonstrated his strength for academic advancement and his eagerness to contribute to the growth and development of his autistic community.

**Becoming the Mentor**

Navigating graduate school while simultaneously fulfilling the role of an Autism mentor served as a profound source of pride and accomplishment for Avery. Drawing from firsthand experiences as an individual on the spectrum, Avery possessed a nuanced understanding of the unique hurdles and victories inherent in navigating life with Autism. He shared:

It wasn't always easy to manage the demands of graduate school with the responsibilities of mentoring, but just knowing that I'm made a difference makes it all worth it. Seeing the students that I mentored succeed filled me with a sense of pride and accomplishment
that's hard to put into words. The dual role not only propelled me towards academic success but has also provided me with a platform to make meaningful impact in the lives of the students. It was a journey of personal and professional growth that inspired and motivated me to be my best.

In his capacity as a mentor, Avery embraced the opportunity to share his wealth of knowledge, lived experiences, and effective strategies with others grappling with similar challenges. This dual role not only propelled Avery towards academic success but also bestowed upon him a platform to make a tangible difference within the Autism community. Through offering guidance, empathy, and unwavering support, Avery empowered individuals on the spectrum to surmount the obstacles of higher education and realize their aspirations, thereby nurturing a profound sense of fulfillment and accomplishment in his own journey of personal and professional development.

Post Graduate Degree Employment Journey

After earning his graduate degree, Avery entered the workforce with a blend of enthusiasm and determination. Despite encountering challenges like navigating financial hardships and handling student loans post-graduation, Avery's resilience, optimistic outlook, diligent work ethic, and commitment to ongoing learning paved the way for success as he embarked on the next phase of his career. Avery’s financial concerns were shared in his interview:

School is expensive. I have loans. I made a plan to pay my loans and I have to work. I got fired from my first job. It wasn’t a good fit. I love my job now but as soon as I pay off my loans, I am going to do whatever I want. I can freelance and be my own boss. For now, I
have to have a job that supports my spending and my lifestyle. I’m satisfied doing any job, but I like branding. I want to build systems.

During the interview, Avery was quite open about his financial concerns, emphasizing the cost of college loans and the need for work. Even in the face of obstacles, like losing his first job, Avery stayed realistic and concentrated on paying off his debts while looking for something that fit his interests and way of life. In the future, he wants to be independent and pursue his own business, especially in the branding industry, with the aim of achieving both financial freedom and career satisfaction.

Avery’s overall career trajectory embodied the spirit of curiosity and adaptability, displaying a willingness to explore diverse opportunities for skill development and vocational exploration beyond traditional career paths. Engaging in freelance work, internships, and extracurricular activities, Avery demonstrated a dynamic approach to career development that transcended conventional paradigms. Rather than adhering to a linear progression, he embraced a flexible mindset, seizing opportunities for growth and learning in various fields. This multifaceted approach not only allowed Avery to expand his skill set but also enabled him to gain valuable insights and experiences across different industries. By embracing exploration and flexibility, Avery exemplified the importance of taking an active role in shaping one's career path and leveraging diverse opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Insights from Narratives

Aaron and Avery's narratives offer deeply inspiring accounts of their journeys navigating the complexities of higher education and transitioning into the workforce as autistic individuals. Both Aaron and Avery faced numerous challenges along their paths but exhibited exceptional resilience, adaptability, and determination, achieving remarkable accomplishments.
In college, Aaron demonstrated a profound commitment to academic excellence and personal growth, consistently excelling in his studies and actively engaging in campus life. His involvement in college interest groups, participation in networking opportunities, and dedication to volunteer work not only enriched his collegiate experience but also equipped him with invaluable skills and connections essential for his future career endeavors. Aaron's proactive approach to seeking support and accommodations, combined with his unwavering perseverance in the face of adversity, exemplifies his steadfast determination to succeed against all odds.

Similarly, Avery's journey into higher education and the workforce is characterized by resilience, self-advocacy, and an unwavering passion for personal and professional development. Despite encountering challenges, Avery navigated the college landscape with remarkable fortitude and adaptability. His initiative-taking efforts in networking, coupled with his relentless pursuit of personal growth opportunities aligned with his interests, enabled him to successfully transition into a fulfilling career path that resonates with his passions and strengths.

Both Aaron and Avery's stories underscore the transformative power of mentorship, support networks, and self-advocacy in navigating employment challenges and fostering career development. Aaron's positive experiences with supportive mentors and allies in the workplace, alongside Avery's proactive approach to seeking guidance and building meaningful connections, highlight the pivotal role of mentorship in facilitating career progression and personal growth among autistic individuals.

Aaron and Avery's narratives are compelling testament to their remarkable accomplishments, fortitude, and unwavering pursuit of their goals. Their narratives not only illustrate the distinct obstacles encountered by individuals with Autism in higher educational and professional settings, but also motivate others to adopt self-advocacy, resilience, and
determination in their own journeys toward success. By incorporating a sociality viewpoint into the narrative research framework, I obtained a more profound understanding of the interpersonal dynamics, community support, and relational circumstances that influence their experiences. Aaron's active participation in college interest groups and networking opportunities, together with Avery's commitment to establishing meaningful connections and seeking assistance, demonstrated the cooperative and interpersonal aspects of their experiences. They illustrate how cultivating supportive relationships, asserting oneself, and utilizing social resources resulted in personal advancement and career progression. Their narratives function as a guiding light, instilling confidence, and motivation to embrace the influence of social connections in navigating their own journeys towards a sense of fulfillment and success.

Summary

The recognition of relevant coursework and collaboration between autistic support services and career centers in various participant experiences aligns seamlessly with the overarching theme of academic and professional development. Participants are clearly aware of the institutional resources that can help them advance, highlighting the need to actively engage with the career center to support academic and professional growth. This theme is evident throughout the transcripts, emphasizing how participants value the collaboration between autistic support services and the career center. This collaboration has been crucial in shaping their academic paths and getting them ready for success in their careers after graduation.

In addition, the participants consistently emphasized the transformative role of mentorship and guidance in their academic and professional journeys. Mentors played a crucial role not only in providing career advice but also in offering invaluable support and encouragement. These mentor-mentee relationships extended beyond the confines of academia,
demonstrating their lasting impact well into the participants' professional lives. Participants emphasized the significance of building meaningful connections and seeking advice from seasoned professionals in navigating the intricacies of their chosen fields through sharing their experiences.

Moreover, adaptability and resilience were key themes in the participants' stories. Participants exhibited impressive resilience and adaptability despite encountering obstacles such as uncertain career prospects in a competitive job market. Adapting to changing circumstances and persevering through adversity not only helped them transition into the professional world but also led to their long-term success and growth. These stories emphasize the significance of developing adaptability skills and staying optimistic to overcome challenges and capitalize on opportunities in one's professional path. In the last chapter, I will provide a summary of the investigation, followed by an examination of the findings, the study's limitations, theoretical framework, and implications for future research.
Chapter 6

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the impact of personal narratives shared by autistic alumni on their ability to secure employment post-graduation. This chapter begins with a summary of the investigation, followed by an examination of the findings in the context of the two research questions. The chapter then briefly discusses the study's limitations, identifies and examines the theoretical framework, and concludes by presenting implications for both future research and practical applications.

Summary of Study

This study aimed to explore the professional career paths of autistic undergraduate alumni, utilizing a narrative-based semi-structured interview approach to capture in-depth data. The research sought to identify factors contributing to the sustained employment of autistic alumni post-graduation, utilizing the frameworks of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977, 1999). The qualitative analysis examines the uncertainty faced by autistic college students in making career choices, the anxiety and stress in job pursuits, and the insufficient knowledge of student loan obligations.

Systematically addressing two primary research questions, the study focused on highlighting the shared challenges faced by autistic undergraduate alumni in their employment post-graduation and understanding the strategies employed to navigate and overcome these challenges. Additionally, it explored the specific experiences during college and post-baccalaureate employment that played pivotal roles in the growth, development, and cultivation of self-confidence among the alumni within the realm of career development. Conducting narrative-based semi-structured interviews allowed me to capture nuanced insights, emphasizing participants' behaviors, practices, and influencing factors within their professional roles. The
meticulous analysis of findings through the lenses of Self-Determination Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory revealed the interconnected nature of significant factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of elements contributing to the retention and sustained success of autistic undergraduate alumni in their chosen fields post-graduation.

**Research Question 1**

The first research question asked, “What are common challenges faced by autistic undergraduate alumni in employment after graduation, and how did these alums successfully grapple with these challenges?” The data revealed that autistic undergraduate alumni encounter a multitude of challenges in employment after graduation, each requiring unique strategies for successful navigation. The first research question sought to identify shared challenges encountered by autistic undergraduate alumni in employment after graduation and explore the strategies employed to overcome these challenges.

Analysis of the data elucidated several recurring themes reflecting the multifaceted nature of the obstacles faced by participants. One prominent challenge identified was the uncertainty surrounding career decision-making, as graduates navigated a complex landscape of employment opportunities while contending with doubts about the most suitable career path. This uncertainty was compounded by factors such as institutional guidance, which often lacked clarity and left graduates feeling adrift in their career pursuits. Additionally, participants grappled with post-graduate stress, characterized by pressures to pursue advanced education and intense competition in specialized fields. The pursuit of graduate degrees emerged as a dominant theme, reflecting a prevailing belief in the necessity of further education for career advancement and competitiveness in the job market. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability, leveraging networking and mentorship opportunities to navigate uncertainty.
and proactive financial planning to address the burden of student loans. Overall, the data underscored the complex and dynamic nature of the challenges faced by autistic undergraduate alumni in post-graduation employment, highlighting the importance of strategic decision-making and resourcefulness in overcoming these obstacles.

**Research Question 2**

The second research question asked, “What specific experiences during college and during post-baccalaureate employment contributed to alumni growth, development, and self-confidence in the arena of career development?” The findings revealed that a multitude of experiences, both during college and post-baccalaureate employment, significantly contributed to alumni growth, development, and self-confidence in the arena of career development. The second research question delved into the specific experiences during both college and post-baccalaureate employment that played pivotal roles in shaping alumni growth, development, and self-confidence in the realm of career development.

The findings unveiled a multifaceted landscape where a range of factors intertwined to influence alumni trajectories. Within the collegiate environment, participants cited impactful experiences such as internships, mentorship programs, relevant coursework, and extracurricular activities as instrumental in honing their skills, expanding their knowledge base, and fostering professional networks. These experiences not only provided practical exposure to real-world scenarios but also instilled a sense of self-assurance and competence in navigating professional settings.

Furthermore, post-baccalaureate employment experiences, including job placements, industry-specific training, and opportunities for advancement, were identified as crucial catalysts for alumni growth and development. These experiences offered firsthand learning opportunities,
allowed for the application of theoretical knowledge acquired during college, and enabled alumni to refine their career goals and aspirations. Moreover, overcoming challenges and setbacks in the workplace contributed to the cultivation of resilience, adaptability, and critical thinking skills, which are essential attributes for career progression. Overall, the findings highlighted the intricate interplay between collegiate and post-baccalaureate experiences in shaping alumni's journey towards professional fulfillment and self-confidence.

**Connection to Theoretical Framework**

The study's findings highlighted the importance of the theoretical framework encompassing Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Self-Efficacy Theory (SET) in understanding the employment experiences of autistic college graduates. The study used SDT to examine how autistic people with a strong feeling of autonomy, competence, and relatedness demonstrated increased motivation and performance in their careers. This was evident in the stories of participants who displayed resilience and adaptation as they navigated the obstacles of competitive job markets while aiming for autonomy and competence in their chosen industries. Furthermore, the incorporation of SET offered insight into the importance of self-efficacy beliefs in determining job success. Participants with stronger self-efficacy engaged in initiative-taking career actions, sought out challenges, and persevered in the face of adversity. Their experiences demonstrated the interconnectivity of self-efficacy with autonomy, competence, and relatedness, emphasizing the necessity of instilling a sense of self-efficacy in autistic individuals to improve their career preparation. Overall, the synthesis of these theories provided a thorough understanding of the motivational mechanisms that drive the career achievements of autistic college graduates, as well as practical insights for supporting their success in the workforce and meeting their diverse needs in higher education and beyond.
**Self Determination Theory**

The study's findings were clearly connected with Self-Determination Theory as outlined by Ryan & Deci (2000). Shedding light on how autonomy, competence, and relatedness influence autistic college graduates' employment experiences. First, the study found that participants who reported a powerful sense of autonomy in their work decisions were more motivated and engaged in their professional activities. Autonomy enabled them to take charge of their employment paths, choosing decisions that reflected their interests and values. Participants' narratives reflected their autonomy, as they acknowledged actively seeking out possibilities and making educated decisions about their career paths.

Furthermore, the study emphasized the significance of competence in generating motivation and success in the workforce. Participants who felt competent in their talents showed more confidence and perseverance in the face of adversity. This competency was created through experiences in college and post-baccalaureate employment when individuals learned and honed abilities related to their chosen areas. These encounters increased their sense of competence and self-efficacy, boosting their motivation to pursue their professional ambitions. Furthermore, the study stressed the importance of relatedness in improving occupational well-being and happiness. Participants with positive social ties and support networks reported higher job satisfaction and overall career fulfillment. These interactions gave emotional support, encouragement, and opportunity for collaboration, promoting a sense of belonging and connection in the workplace.

Overall, the study's findings demonstrated the importance of SDT in understanding the work experiences of autistic college graduates. The study gave useful insights on the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in inspiring and empowering individuals in their
career pursuits, so strengthening the vocational readiness and success of autistic individuals in the workforce.

**Self-Efficacy Theory**

The study's findings were highly consistent with Bandura’s (1977;1999) SET, shedding light on the critical role of self-efficacy beliefs in molding the job experiences of autistic college graduates. First, the study found that people with higher levels of self-efficacy were more likely to participate in initiative-taking career practices and persevere in the face of adversity. These individuals displayed confidence in their talents to thrive in their chosen careers, which drove them to aggressively seek out chances and overcome obstacles.

Furthermore, the study emphasized the role of self-efficacy beliefs in career decision-making and goal setting. Participants who held strong self-efficacy beliefs had better clarity and determination in selecting and achieving their career goals. They approached their careers with a sense of agency and optimism, confident in their ability to succeed despite any obstacles.

In addition, the findings highlighted the relationship between self-efficacy and other psychological characteristics, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as indicated in the theoretical framework. Individuals with elevated levels of self-efficacy reported more autonomy in decision-making, confidence in their abilities, and positive social relationships at work. These interrelated factors collectively contributed to their overall vocational readiness and success.

Overall, the study's findings offered empirical evidence for the SET principles' application to understanding the professional growth of autistic college graduates. By explaining the significance of self-efficacy beliefs in inspiring individuals to follow their career objectives and persevere in the face of adversity, the study provided practical insights for improving the vocational results of autistic individuals in the workforce.
Limitations

In accordance with standard research protocols, this study acknowledges inherent limitations within its research design that can potentially impact the interpretation of findings, which may influence the interpretation of the findings, often taking the form of identified weaknesses (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The following section provides a clear explanation of the constraints of this study, categorized into three primary aspects: Researcher Bias, Methodological Considerations, and Generalizability.

Researcher Bias

Researcher bias is an inherent difficulty, representing the possibility of personal beliefs, values, or preferences infiltrating the study's design, delivery, and interpretation (Merriam, 1998). The study acknowledges the vulnerability to bias and its potential impact on outcomes. Despite my best efforts to remain objective, my underlying thoughts, emotions, and prejudices may unintentionally influence data interpretation. Employing approaches such as reflexivity and guaranteeing procedural transparency serves as a mitigation tactic, while eliminating subjectivity remains difficult.

Methodological Considerations

Methodological considerations are important in this research. While the chosen narrative-based semi-structured interview approach produces rich qualitative data, it also exposes interpretive biases. Limitations include sample size and selection criteria, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, relying on retrospective self-reports introduces memory bias, which reduces the accuracy of participant remembering.

Generalizability
Generalizability refers to the extent to which the findings or conclusions of a study can be applied to a larger population or context (Merriam, 1998). Another relevant constraint relates to the difficulty of generalizing the findings. The findings may only apply to the specific population that was investigated, which consists of individuals who have Autism, graduated from college, and secured paid employment after graduation. Therefore, the outcomes may not fully reflect the wider autistic population or other demographic categories. The study's exclusive emphasis on job development among autistic individuals limits the applicability of its findings to diverse contextual settings or demographics.

Recognizing and confronting these constraints is crucial for developing a comprehensive understanding of the study's scope and implications. Although the study has certain limitations, it provides useful insights within its specific boundaries, serving as a basis for future studies.

Implications

The study's findings have a number of implications for future research and practice in assisting autistic college graduates in their transition to employment. I detail some of the implications below.

Implications for Practice

The study's findings have significant implications for practice, particularly within higher education institutions and college career centers. To better support autistic college students, educational institutions should prioritize the development of career counseling services and mentorship programs tailored to their unique needs. These programs should offer guidance throughout the transition to the workforce and facilitate connections between students and mentors who possess an understanding of Autism.
Additionally, college career centers need to develop specialized resources and training programs to assist autistic college graduates in navigating the job market effectively. These resources should include workshops on resume writing, interview techniques, and workplace communication skills, tailored specifically to the needs of autistic individuals. College career centers should also collaborate with employers who advertise jobs on their website to advocate for workplace accommodations and create inclusive hiring practices. By offering targeted support and resources, both higher education institutions and career centers can empower autistic college students and graduates to succeed in their post graduate employment journey. By implementing these practices, educational institutions and career centers can play a vital role in supporting the vocational success of autistic individuals.

Furthermore, the study highlights the pivotal role of faculty mentorship in facilitating the academic and professional development of autistic students. The positive impact of faculty mentorship on students' career outcomes is evident, with autistic students benefiting significantly from mentorship relationships. Through mentorship, students developed essential skills such as self-advocacy, communication, and problem-solving, which are vital for success in the workforce. Furthermore, faculty mentors provide students with valuable connections and opportunities for internships, research projects, and job placements, enhancing their employability and career prospects. Therefore, higher education institutions should actively encourage faculty members to engage in mentorship opportunities with autistic students, recognizing the transformative influence it can have on their academic and professional growth.

Through these initiative-taking measures, educational institutions and career centers can play a pivotal role in not only fostering the vocational success and overall well-being of autistic individuals but also in cultivating a culture of inclusivity and equity within society at large. By
providing tailored support services and resources, these institutions empower autistic individuals to thrive in their academic pursuits and professional endeavors, thus contributing to their overall sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. Moreover, by advocating for workplace accommodations and facilitating mentorship opportunities, educational institutions and career centers actively dismantle barriers to entry and advancement in the workforce for autistic individuals, promoting a more diverse and inclusive employment landscape. Ultimately, by championing the rights and potential of autistic individuals, these institutions contribute to the creation of a society that values diversity, equity, and opportunity for all.

**Implications for Future Research**

The study's findings suggest multiple avenues for future research in the field of Autism and employment. Firstly, future research should explore the effectiveness of diverse types of mentorship models and interventions in supporting autistic college graduates' career development. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term impact of mentorship programs on employment outcomes and career advancement. Additionally, future research should investigate the role of individual and contextual factors, such as self-determination and workplace accommodations, in shaping the vocational experiences of autistic individuals. By addressing these research gaps, future studies can contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions and practices to support the successful transition of autistic college graduates into the workforce.

This study’s identification of mentorship as a significant influence in participants' career growth emphasizes the need of incorporating mentorship programs within post-graduate assistance activities. Future research should investigate the precise aspects and usefulness of mentorship relationships in promoting vocational success for people with Autism. Furthermore,
the emphasis on employment-related issues highlights the importance of specialized interventions and resources to meet the specific needs of autistic college graduates in the job market. Future research should include longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of mentorship programs and interventions aimed at improving employment prospects for autistic individuals.

Summary

The study utilized qualitative narrative research to delve into the employment experiences of autistic college graduates, effectively capturing the positive stories of successful alumni. The research uncovered several key themes through each research question. Research Question 1 highlighted the challenging themes of uncertainty in making the right career choices, anxiety and stress in job pursuits, and insufficient knowledge of student loan obligations. Secondly, Question 1 captured strategies to grapple with the challenges to include mentorship and networking, adaptability, and resilience, and planning for student loan obligations. These themes underscored the resilience, determination, and resourcefulness of autistic college graduates in the face of employment challenges.

Research Question 2 delved into the experiences during both college and post-baccalaureate employment that contributed significantly to career success. The study identified three key themes: nurturing career growth through mentorship, attaining career readiness through integrated Autism support, and achieving career success through adaptability and resilience.

The study first demonstrated the significant influence of mentorship relationships on the career paths of participants by fostering professional growth through mentoring. These relationships provided invaluable guidance and support, shaping career choices, and fostering holistic growth.
Second, achieving career readiness through integrated Autism support highlighted the crucial role of Autism support programs in preparing participants for the workforce. Through resources such as mock interviews and resume development sessions, participants gained essential skills and confidence necessary for successful employment.

Finally, achieving career success through adaptability and resilience highlighted the participants' ability to navigate obstacles and seize opportunities, demonstrating both personal and professional growth. This theme emphasized their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and persevere through challenges, ultimately charting a path to success in the professional world.

Furthermore, this study has consequences that go beyond providing practical recommendations. It also includes prospects for future research and the improvement of college career readiness programs for autistic individuals. Through continued exploration of the experiences and needs of autistic alumni, researchers can enhance their understanding and develop more effective solutions to promote their vocational success. In addition, continuous collaboration between both academia and the professional world can result in the creation of customized resources and programs that specifically target the unique challenges that may be encountered by autistic individuals.

To summarize, this study highlights the transformative potential of qualitative narrative research in capturing the positive narratives of successful autistic alumni. By offering insights and guidance for supporting their journey into the professional world, this research contributes to the ongoing efforts to create more inclusive and equitable opportunities for autistic individuals.
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Appendix I: Recruitment Email

Date:
Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Volunteer Research Study on Autistic College Graduates' Career Success

Dear [Recipient's Name],
I hope this email finds you well. It's MaryEllen Stephens from [University Name]. I trust you remember me; we've crossed paths at [context of where we met or common relationship/connection].

I am reaching out today because I am currently working on my doctoral research, and I wonder if you would consider participating. I would love to have your input and experiences as part of this important study!

The focus of my study is to understand the experiences of autistic adults who have successfully graduated with a baccalaureate degree and have obtained a full-time, paid position within six months of graduation.

Given our previous interactions and knowing your journey, I believe your experiences and insights would greatly contribute to this study. I am excited to learn more about your personal growth during college, your career development experiences, and your transition into the workforce after graduation.

If you're open to it, participation would involve 1 to 2 online, semi-structured interviews at a time of your convenience, likely lasting about 60-90 minutes. I want to reassure you that your participation will remain confidential, and no personally identifiable information will be disclosed.

If you are interested, please follow the QR code above or this link to register and complete an eligibility Qualtrics survey, Informed Consent, and basic demographic questions.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at mstephens@wcupa.edu. Thank you so much for considering this, [Recipient's Name]. Although this is an unpaid study, your voice in this research could make a significant difference in our understanding and support of autistic college graduates' career development and success.

Thank you,
MaryEllen Stephens, M.S.
Doctoral Candidate

This study has been approved by the [University Name] Institutional Review Board, protocol IRB-FY2023-361
Appendix II: Snowball Recruitment Email

Date:

Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Volunteer Research Study on Autistic College Graduates' Career Success

Dear [Recipient's Name],

I hope this email finds you well. My name is MaryEllen Stephens, a doctoral candidate at [West Chester University]. I am reaching out to you after being referred by [Referrer's Name], who thought you might be interested in my current research project.

The focus of my study is to understand the experiences of autistic adults who have successfully graduated with a baccalaureate degree and have obtained a full-time, paid position within six months of graduation.

I believe your experiences and insights would greatly contribute to this study. I am excited to learn more about your personal growth during college, your career development experiences, and your transition into the workforce after graduation.

If you're open to it, participation would involve 1 to 2 online, semi-structured interviews at a time of your convenience, likely lasting about 60-90 minutes. I want to reassure you that your participation will remain confidential, and no personally identifiable information will be disclosed.

If you are interested, please follow the QR code or use this link to register and complete an eligibility Qualtrics survey, Informed Consent, and basic demographic questions.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at mstephens@wcupa.edu.

Thank you so much for considering this, [Recipient's Name]. Although this is an unpaid study, your voice in this research could make a significant difference in our understanding and support of autistic college graduates' career development and success.

Thank you,

MaryEllen Stephens, M.S.

[West Chester University]

Doctoral Candidate

This study has been approved by the [West Chester University Institutional Review Board, protocol IRB-FY2023-361]
Appendix III: Eligibility Qualtrics survey

Introduction Dear Participant,

Welcome, and thank you for your interest in participating in my research study. I am a researcher at West Chester University, working on a project to understand how college experiences contribute to autistic individuals’ employment success after graduation.

My goal is to better understand your unique experiences and perspectives on these topics, with a desire to use these insights to guide support and resources available for students like you.

Please take a few minutes to complete the questions below. This survey consists of three portions: Eligibility, Informed Consent, and a few demographic questions. The information you provide in this survey is entirely confidential and will be used only for research purposes.

Please be assured that your participation is voluntary, and you can choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Thank you once again for your participation. Your contribution to this study is greatly appreciated.

Please begin the demographic survey.

Best,
MaryEllen Stephens, M.S.

IRB#IRB-FY2023-361

1. Do you have Autism (diagnosed or self-identified)
   - Yes (1)
   - No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Do you have Autism (diagnosed or self-identified) = No

2. Are you 18 years or older?
   - Yes (1)
   - No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If You Are 18 years or older? = No

3. Have you earned a baccalaureate degree?
Yes (1)
No (2)
Skip To: End of Survey If You Have earned a Baccalaureate degree? = No

4. Were you successfully employed in a paid position within 6 months after graduation?
   Yes (1)
   No (2)
Skip To: End of Survey If Were you successfully employed in a full-time, paid position within 6 months after graduation? = No
Appendix IV: Demographic Questions

The following is a series of demographic questions. Please remember that this information will only be shared to show how many people took part in the study and how different their backgrounds are. No one, including other people in the study or the general public, will have access to your personal information. If you change your mind about including this information in the study later, you can talk to MaryEllen Stephens or the Office of Sponsored Research.

1. Date of Birth:
2. Gender Identity
3. Sexual Orientation:
4. How do you identify your race?
5. How do you identify your ethnicity?
6. What is your (or your immediate family's) socioeconomic status?
   - Low income (at or below 36,900 USD/year for a family of 4) (1)
   - Middle income (between 36,900 and 85,000 USD/year) (2)
   - High-income (above 85,000 USD per year) (3)

7. Are you the first in your family to attend college?
   - Yes (1)
   - No (2)
8. If "No," who in your family has attended and/or completed college? (Be detailed please)
9. What is the highest level of formal education that you have completed?
   - Bachelor's degree (1)
   - Master's degree (2)
   - Other (3) ____________________________

10. What is the highest level of formal education that PARENT 1 has completed? (Please indicate sex/gender of Parent 1)

11. What is the highest level of formal education that PARENT 2 has completed? (Please indicate sex/gender of Parent 2)

_____________________
Appendix V: Informed Consent

**Project Title:** Navigating Post-College Career Paths: Perspectives on Career Identity and Self-Efficacy from Autistic Alumni

Investigator(s): MaryEllen Stephens; Faculty: Orkideh Mohajeri

**Project Overview:**

Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by MaryEllen Stephens as part of their Doctoral Dissertation to:

Project Overview: Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by MaryEllen Stephens as part of her doctoral dissertation research to examine the employment experiences of autistic college alumni who successfully found employment after graduation. Your participation will take place 1-2 times in a semi-structured interview over Zoom. I ask that you grant informed consent through this Qualtrics survey. This survey consists of: (a) Inclusion and exclusion criterion, (b) Informed Consent, and (3) some simple demographic questions. After consent is given, you will be asked to sign up for and complete 1-2 semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes over Zoom. There is a minimal risk of experiencing emotionally intense and/or difficult feelings during such story sharing. However, benefits include: the opportunity to contribute to a study that aims to improve support services for autistic college students, particularly in the areas of career planning and self-efficacy. The research project is being done by MaryEllen Stephens as part of her doctoral dissertation research to examine the employment experiences of autistic college alumni who successfully found employment after graduation. If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form. You may ask MaryEllen Stephens any questions to help you understand this study. If you don’t want to be a part of this study, it will not affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this research is to understand how the experiences of autistic college grads during their college years contributed to their success in employment, specifically employment after graduation.

2. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**

   1. Take a Qualtrics survey.
   2. Sign informed consent through Qualtrics.
      i. Schedule for a Zoom interview
   3. Review interview questions that are emailed to participant.
   4. Complete Zoom interview.
   5. Schedule follow up Zoom interview if needed.
   6. This study will take up to 180 minutes of your time.

3. **Are there any experimental medical treatments?**

   1. No

4. **Is there any risk to me?**

   1. Possible risks or sources of discomfort include the following: Possible and minimal discomfort or emotional distress when discussing personal experiences. Participants will be reminded that they can choose not to answer any question and can withdraw from the study at any time.
2. If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with MaryEllen Stephens [redacted]

3. If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

5. **Is there any benefit to me?**
   1. Benefits to you may include the following: There are no direct benefits for the participants such as financial compensation; however, participants will have the opportunity to contribute to a study that aims to improve support services for autistic college students, particularly in the areas of career planning and self-efficacy.
   2. Other benefits may include benefits to society: This study intends to fill this gap in the research by investigating the influence of career identity and self-efficacy in the employment success of autistic college graduates. Specifically, I will investigate the employment experiences of autistic college alumni who successfully found employment at graduation. I will collect stories focused on career identity formation and self-efficacy from autistic college graduates who secured full-time, paid employment within six months of graduation.

6. **How will you protect my privacy?**
   1. The sessions will be recorded on Zoom.
   2. The information to be gathered in this study includes the stories and perceptions of autistic college alums about their employment journeys through individual Zoom interviews. I will focus on career competencies, self-efficacy, and career identity, along with their suggestions on how to increase employment success for their peers. Data will be primarily collected and recorded via the Zoom application. I will also record the interview conversation simultaneously on a small handheld recording device, just to minimize the possibility of faulty recording or loss of data.
   3. Your records will be private. Only MaryEllen Stephens, Orkideh Mohajeri, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
   4. Your name will **not** be used in any reports.
      i. Records will be stored on a password protected computer.
   5. How will you protect my privacy? - The Zoom interviews will be recorded on a double password protected computer, cameras will be off, and a pseudonym will be used in place of your own name on the screen. Only MaryEllen Stephens and the IRB will have access to your name and responses. - Your real name will not be used in any reports. - Records will be stored in a password protected File/Computer. - Collected Zoom recorded stories and narrative will be downloaded and saved to a password protected database such as OneDrive. - Recordings will be destroyed three years after study completion. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants, all identifiable information will be removed or replaced with pseudonyms in the transcription process. - The data will be kept for a period of three years after the completion of the study and will then be securely destroyed.

7. **Do I get paid to take part in this study?**
   1. No

8. **Who do I contact in case of research related injury?**
   1. For any questions with this study, contact:
      
      **Primary Investigator:** MaryEllen Stephens at [redacted]
      **Faculty Sponsor:** Orkideh Mohajeri at [redacted]

9. **What will you do with my Identifiable Information?**
   a. Your personally identifiable information will be kept in a password-protected file. I might get in touch with you to schedule a follow-up interview or to ask a question over the phone or Zoom. You can get in touch with the Office of
Research and Sponsored Projects at 610-436-3557 if you have any questions about your rights in this research project. For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

I, ________________________________ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

- Yes, I agree to participate in this research study (1)
- No, I do not agree to participate in this research study (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Informed Consent:  Informed Consent Study: Navigating Post-College Career Paths: Perspectives on... = No, I do not agree to participate in this research study

Skip To: Contact If Informed Consent:  Informed Consent Study: Navigating Post-College Career Paths: Perspectives on... = Yes, I agree to participate in this research study

Contact Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project! Please provide your contact information.

- Name (1) __________________________________________________
- Email (2) __________________________________________________
- Cell Phone number (3) ________________________________________
Appendix VI: Interview Questions

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study on the career development of autistic students after graduation. Before we begin getting into the specific topic, I am going to ask you a few questions that will help me to understand your background and who you are:

1. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study on the career development of autistic students after graduation. Before we begin getting into the specific topic, I am going to ask you a few questions that will help me to understand your background and who you are:
   a. What is the make-up of your family, and do you have siblings?
   b. Where did you grow up in terms of city or region?
   c. When were you diagnosed as autistic, and (sense of scope of support)?
   d. Where’d you go to high school and what was that experience like for you?

2. Where did you go to college and how did you pick that school?

3. Once you were at college, what did you major in and how did you pick that major?

4. If you think about your entire college experience, what would you say were the top 2 challenges that you faced?

5. If you think about your entire college experience, what would you say were the top 2 triumphs?

6. How did your coursework and academic experience impact your personal growth and career development as an individual with Autism?

7. Can you describe your experiences forming and maintaining friendships during your college years? How did these relationships influence your college experience and subsequent career success?

8. What is your current employment?

9. What significant experiences during your college years do you feel contributed to your current career success? Please provide specific examples or stories if possible.

10. What aspects of your career development experiences during college do you think were the most beneficial for your transition into the professional world?

11. Could you describe your job searching and interview process post-graduation? How did your college experiences or resources help in this process?

12. Can you tell me about your professional journey following graduation? What were some successes and challenges you faced, particularly considering your Autism?
13. What kind of support or resources would you have wanted more of during your college years to better prepare you for post-college employment?

14. Could you share a memorable moment or story that encapsulates your overall experience as an autistic student transitioning into a professional role post-graduation?

15. Thank you so much for your time. You know my overall topic. Is there anything that I should have asked you about career development for autistic college grads that I failed to include? What is it and how would you answer it?
Appendix VII: Facebook & LinkedIn Post

 görmüşslen께 독자님들께, 당신의 성공을 지닌 재학시기의 등록의 종성, 각인상의 양상, 그리고 저의 연구의 정도를 이해하기 위해 여러분의 성공을 의미하는 경험을 나누실 수 있도록 초청합니다.

Why Participate?

당신의 이야기는 승리와 정의의 신호입니다. 미래의 자폐증 대학생에게 중요한 통찰력을 제공할 수 있습니다. 공개 및 전략을 공유함으로써, 당신은 자폐증 개인들이 대학 이론에서 근로장성을 위한 지원 시스템과 자원을 개선할 수 있는 역할을 할 수 있습니다.

Study Details:

- Purpose: To explore common challenges, growth, development, and self-confidence in career development among autistic college alumni.
- Participation: Includes a one-on-one Zoom interview about your college experience, employment journey, and personal growth.
- Confidentiality: Your personal information and responses will be kept strictly confidential.

Eligibility:

- Must be an autistic individual who has earned a baccalaureate degree.
- Must have secured paid employment within six months of graduation.

How to Participate?

If you meet the eligibility criteria and are interested in participating in this study, please follow the QR code below or this link to register and complete Informed Consent.

Your story can make a difference! Please feel free to share this post with anyone who might be eligible and interested. Together, we can create a positive impact on the lives of autistic college students and graduates.

#AutismSuccessStories #CareerDevelopment #ResearchStudy #MakeADifference

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board, protocol IRB-FY2023-361
Appendix VIII: Facebook & LinkedIn Personal Message

Hello,

I hope this message finds you well. I'm reaching out to invite you to participate in a study I'm conducting at West Chester University. I am exploring the success stories of autistic college graduates who found employment within six months of earning their baccalaureate degrees. Your insights could be instrumental in supporting the career development of future autistic college students and graduates. Participation involves a one-on-one interview, and your information will remain confidential.

If you are interested, please follow the QR code below or this link to register and complete Informed Consent.

Thank you for considering this opportunity. Should you have any questions, feel free to contact me directly at 484-838-3093.

This study has been approved by the West Chester University Institutional Review Board, protocol IRB-FY2023-361
Appendix IX: Follow-up Email

Date:

Subject: Scheduling Your Interview for the Research Study on Autistic College Graduates' Career Success

Dear [Recipient's Name],

I hope this email finds you well. I am writing to express my sincere gratitude for agreeing to participate in my research study on the experiences of autistic adults who have a baccalaureate degree and were employed 6 months after graduation in a paid position. Your insights are crucial in understanding this journey and can greatly contribute to the development of support strategies for future students.

The next step is to schedule our interview. It will be a semi-structured, online conversation that will likely take about 60-90 minutes. Your convenience and comfort are my priority, so I want to offer a few different scheduling options:

Option 1: [Date & Time]

Option 2: [Date & Time]

Option 3: [Date & Time]

Please let me know which of these options works best for you, or if there are other dates and times that you would prefer. I will send you a Zoom link (or your preferred video conferencing platform) once we have agreed on a time.

In this interview, we will discuss your college experiences, career development, and post-graduation employment. Please remember that your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time. Everything you share will be confidential and used solely for the purposes of this study.

If you have any questions or need further clarification about the study, feel free to respond to this email.

Looking forward to hearing from you soon. The interview questions are attached for your review.

Thank you,

MaryEllen Stephens, M.S.

[Redacted]

Doctoral Candidate

This study has been approved by the [Redacted] Institutional Review Board, protocol IRB-FY2023-361
16. Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study on the career development of autistic students after graduation. Before we begin getting into the specific topic, I am going to ask you a few questions that will help me to understand your background and who you are:
   a. What is the make-up of your family, and do you have siblings?
   b. Where did you grow up in terms of city or region?
   c. When were you diagnosed as autistic, and (sense of scope of support)?
   d. Where’d you go to high school and what was that experience like for you?

17. Where did you go to college and how did you pick that school?
18. Once you were at college, what did you major in and how did you pick that major?
19. If you think about your entire college experience, what would you say were the top 2 challenges that you faced?
20. If you think about your entire college experience, what would you say were the top 2 triumphs?

21. How did your coursework and academic experience impact your personal growth and career development as an individual with Autism?

22. Can you describe your experiences forming and maintaining friendships during your college years? How did these relationships influence your college experience and subsequent career success?

23. What is your current employment?

24. What significant experiences during your college years do you feel contributed to your current career success? Please provide specific examples or stories if possible.

25. What aspects of your career development experiences during college do you think were the most beneficial for your transition into the professional world?

26. Could you describe your job searching and interview process post-graduation? How did your college experiences or resources help in this process?

27. Can you tell me about your professional journey following graduation? What were some successes and challenges you faced, particularly considering your Autism?

28. What kind of support or resources would you have wanted more of during your college years to better prepare you for post-college employment?

29. Could you share a memorable moment or story that encapsulates your overall experience as an autistic student transitioning into a professional role post-graduation?
30. Thank you so much for your time. You know my overall topic. Is there anything that I should have asked you about career development for autistic college grads that I failed to include? What is it and how would you answer it?

As part of my research methodology, I am using a technique known as 'snowball sampling,' which allows me to extend my network of participants through referrals. Can you recommend other employed autistic college graduates for my study?
Appendix X: IRB Approval Letter

Aug 24, 2023 1:56:32 PM EDT

To: MaryEllen Stephens
Col of Health Sciences, Ed Leadership & Higher Ed Adm


Dear MaryEllen Stephens:

Thank you for your submitted application to the West Chester University Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Navigating Post-College Career Paths: Perspectives on Career Identity and Self-Efficacy from Autistic Alumni.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Sincerely,

[Institutional Review Board]

IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155