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Susan Byrd Jenkins

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SUPPORTS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER:  
VIEWS OF POSTSECONDARY PRACTITIONERS AND FACULTY REGARDING  
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER STUDENT SERVICE PROVISION

A Dissertation presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Education in the Department of Higher Education  
The University of Mississippi

by Susan B. Jenkins

May 2022

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## ABSTRACT

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are matriculating to higher education at growing rates and are now believed to make up roughly one to two percent of the postsecondary student population (Cox & South, 2017; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as cited in Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Service provision for college students with ASD typically falls under the oversight of student disability services practitioners who provide guidance to faculty and staff regarding accommodations. The professionals who carry out ASD service delivery are a source of expertise, insight and understanding regarding recommended supports for students on the spectrum. This study was designed to provide practitioners with the opportunity to share their experiences and discuss ways to enhance ASD supports in higher education.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Ryan, and our remarkable son, Reagan. Your love and encouragement have been the driving force behind my work. I am thankful for your patience and understanding throughout this journey we have embarked on as a family.

I would also like to dedicate this study to my parents and my siblings. I am fortunate to have parents who raised their children to serve Christ and to recognize the value in all members of society by seeking understanding from the diverse experiences of others. I am forever grateful to my brother and my two sisters for their never-ending support and acceptance. I carry the influence of my family with me in this work.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my chair, Dr. Macey Edmondson, for her support and guidance during this process. Her confidence in my work allowed me to remain uplifted and motivated throughout this journey. Dr. Edmondson's encouragement and leadership were vital in the successful completion of this dissertation.

I would like to acknowledge the "dream team" Dissertation Committee: Dr. Amy Wells Dolan, Dr. Kerry Brian Melear, and Dr. Sara Platt. I have seen your remarkable work and the significant contributions you have made to your fields of study over the years. It was a dream come true to have you devote your time and expertise to this endeavor. I am extremely grateful for your feedback and insight throughout this process. I continue to be inspired by each of you to do purposeful and meaningful work to benefit the community and higher education.

The faculty and staff of the Higher Education Department at the University of Mississippi deserve recognition for the unwavering work being done to address issues of ethics, equity, and social justice in postsecondary education. Dr. Phillis George set the tone early in the program that the work I choose to do as a scholarly practitioner be carried out in ways that confront obstacles to accessibility in education. It was an honor to have an experience led by such a talented group of educators who not only provided direction in implementing this study but also recognized the importance of this work on disability services for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I am grateful to Dr. George McClellan for his guidance in the process of identifying the problem of practice for which is addressed in this study. I would also like to thank

Dean Rock for his tireless leadership in the School Education at the University of Mississippi and his steadfast dedication as an educator.

I would like to recognize my friends, colleagues, and mentors at the North Mississippi Regional Center. The individuals I have had the pleasure of serving for over twenty years have inspired me to seek ways to further advocate for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I have learned from some of the best and brightest in the field and I am forever grateful for the support and guidance I have received from the amazing professionals and residents who make up this wonderful organization.

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## MANUSCRIPT ONE

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are entering institutions of higher learning at increasing rates due to factors including increased awareness of learning differences, enhanced identification and diagnosis processes, improved individual learning plans, and more effective special education practices (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as cited in Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Clear statistics regarding postsecondary ASD student enrollment are undetermined as it is not required that students report a diagnosis to the University for admission. It is believed, however, that over forty percent of secondary students with ASD receive some form of postsecondary education in the United States making up roughly one or two percent of American college students (Cox & South, 2017). There is a wide range of functioning associated with ASD, but communication and social skills deficits are typically present (Wheeler, 2014). Postsecondary disability services professionals encounter diverse needs and supports for these individualized and unique students. Providing services for a student with ASD requires the practitioner to consider the personalized needs of the individual as not all persons with the diagnosis present the same characteristics or needs. This uniqueness present in symptoms reveals why the word spectrum is included in the diagnosis title.

The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) provides standardized criteria for diagnosing an individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The requirements include deficits in social communication and social interaction; and severity based on social communication impairments and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior. Social communication and interaction deficits may include social-emotional

reciprocity, nonverbal communication, and challenges maintaining and understanding relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The DSM-5 notes restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior can be manifested by stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, insistence on sameness and inflexibility, fixated interest, and hyperactivity or hypoactivity to sensory input.

Indicators of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) appear early in the childhood development period, but symptoms may not fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities which may occur later in development (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). College may prove to be a difficult time for individuals with ASD who are characteristically more likely to experience stress related to academic commitment, time management, study skills, and social interactions (Novotney, 2014). Wheeler (2014) proclaimed there is more to college life than intellectual pursuits. An individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may have the intellectual capacity for academic study but have challenges with the ability to navigate the campus and adhere to a course schedule. Ferrette (2018) stated that a former college student with ASD once reported on the challenges of trying to find structure in college. The support and guidance to which he had grown accustomed prior to college was historically provided by family or other groups mandated by law in the K-12 school system. He dropped out of college just before being expelled feeling overwhelmed by the rigors and social challenges of college life (Ferrette, 2018). These types of challenges encountered by students in the postsecondary setting have also resulted in individuals who have not been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) but become aware of symptoms once encountering difficulty with navigating college life (Wheeler, 2014).

Graduation rates for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are low at 41% (Cox & South, 2017) causing concern for individuals and families who view college completion

as an opportunity for individuals with ASD to have an enhanced quality of life and be a contributing member to society. Feinstein (2018) reported that only 16% of individuals with ASD are employed full-time. Social issues associated with the diagnosis often prevent these individuals from being selected for employment or remaining employed, yet individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) prove to be valuable assets to the workplace when provided with a supportive environment nurturing skills and talents (Feinstein, 2018). Society benefits from this population being productive members of the workforce, and these individuals also benefit from financial and emotional gains received from employment (Feinstein, 2018).

Educational and service requirements for early learners are provided for American school systems by way of civil rights laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Chan, 2016). In the K-12 setting, schools are required by law to provide services to students with a diagnosis as well as develop and adhere to an Individualized Education Plan (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). In the postsecondary setting, however, students must self-disclose in order to receive services (Blackwell & Rosetti, 2014). Self-disclosure of a disability is entirely voluntary, and many students who received disability services or accommodations in secondary education do not self-disclose when transitioned to college (Newman & Madaus, 2014). The lack of self-disclosure is at times the result of students feeling they have established a sufficient strategy for academic success, whereas others are fearful of discrimination and the stigma attached to receiving services (Martin, 2010). If a student does not self-disclose then services are not provided to the individual simply as a result of the institution not being made aware of the student's needs.

Disability service providers attempt to provide supports for students with Autism

Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who are experiencing the challenges of being away from home and the more structured supports which were required by law in their earlier years of education. Practitioners are presented with a great task of determining what supports are needed and available for college students with ASD, yet their work can be guided by various philosophies and views on service provision.

Labaree (1997) described democratic equality as one goal for American education considering the perspective of the citizen with an approach to preparing the nation's youth for competently carrying out the responsibilities of citizenship. One appealing component of democratic equality to a disability services practitioner is the notion of equal treatment through education via a "common culture and sense of shared membership in the community" (Labaree, 1997, p. 45). Viewing education through the lens of democratic equality allows one to view education as a public good (Labaree, 1997). Just as the federal government has taken a stance on the civil rights of Americans with Disabilities as a public interest, disability service practitioners may be driven by the view of disability service provision for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a public good.

The work of professionals who devote careers to service provision for individuals with disabilities may be guided by disability theory. In the realm of higher education, service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) requires a team of support consisting of students, advisors, counselors, faculty and families (Duggan, 2017). Duggan (2017) argued that although parents and counselors know the individuals well, they often fall short about what they believe the student is experiencing, with most students saying they wished adults would realize that they are capable of much more than they are given credit. Approaching disability service provision through a disability studies theory lens can argue the student knows

what is best for themselves as opposed to the adults making the decisions for them (Cory, White & Stuckey, 2010).

Duggan (2017) found that people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often prefer to be left alone as a way of avoiding the stress of expectation. Social rules and obligations encourage behavior such as making eye contact and socializations with peers, but such expectations can be seen as demanding and result in disappointment. Many individuals on the spectrum may have difficulties with displaying emotions, but this does not mean they are void of having emotions (Wheeler, 2014). These students feel loneliness and sadness just like the typical college student (Duggan, 2017). An effort to communicate and listen to the experiences of this group of students could lead to insight and understanding which could build on relationships with students diagnosed with ASD. College students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may not view themselves as disabled or place themselves in a minority classification system which could result in stigma or oppression. Determining which supports and accommodations are needed for students with ASD requires the practitioner to be an active listener and to be an advocate who seeks insight and understanding from the student (Duggan, 2017).

The literature suggests that general supports currently available in educational settings are often inadequate for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) given the characteristics of the diagnosis (Siew et al., 2017). Barnhill (2016) noted that as the unique needs of students with ASD became apparent, some colleges began to offer specialized programs. Various colleges and universities have differing requirements, however, for receiving services leaving a potential student to be unprepared for the required documentation which may be required to be presented in order to qualify for services. Kuder and Accardo (2018) noted growth in research on postsecondary students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) identifying the unique needs of

this group of individuals and various services offered, yet minimal data is provided on effective practices that enhance outcomes.

The nature of disability theory is tied to action and social justice. Disability services practitioners whose work is guided by such theory can see student requests for enhanced services as a call to action. Enhanced interventions and supports from colleges and universities are needed to increase the likelihood that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) will be successful in degree obtainment. The professionals in the field of disability services are a source of not only expertise, but insight and understanding regarding students with ASD. This study examines views of staff and faculty at select universities in Mississippi regarding strategies in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in postsecondary education.

#### POSITIONALITY

Over twenty years in the field of service provision for individuals with various types of developmental disabilities drives this study. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines developmental disability as a group of conditions due to an impairment in physical, learning, language, or behavior areas (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Duggan (2017) cautions that this term is a catch-all for a variety of disability groups, including individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Inadequate staff training and a lack of resources can result in inadequate services for colleges students on the spectrum. Truth be told, many citizens feel higher education is simply not for everyone. There is a sense of educational exclusivity for which many minority groups have struggled to break barriers, and this is the experience for many individuals with developmental disabilities such as those with ASD. Challenges have been encountered by these students in various, if not all, stages of life regarding access to education. Obtaining access to a postsecondary education harbors even more

challenges as colleges and universities are not bound by the same educational laws and legislation as pre-college education. Exclusions and hierarchies in institutions of higher learning further remove power from marginalized individuals (Hall, 2019).

As a scholarly practitioner there is an awareness and acceptance of the notion that certain experiences of the researcher effect the way in which the world is viewed and interpreted (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). The way a study is approached, how the participants are viewed, how data is collected and interpreted are all influenced by the position from which the researcher perceives the world. As a longtime advocate and service provider for individuals with developmental disabilities, there is a personal desire to build upon the body of literature regarding individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in postsecondary education. The research in this study is steered in the direction of the professionals carrying out service provision for this unique population of college students. Three contexts shape the positionality presented in this section providing insight into the significance of the need for the study on the part of the researcher: personal background, professional background, and future plans.

### **Personal Background**

The foundation for this study was established in the first years of a career which has come to span more than two decades. I entered the field of disability service provision at the age of nineteen and quickly became aware that I wanted to be an advocate for some of the most vulnerable and marginalized individuals I had ever encountered. I also felt compelled to become an advocate for those providing the care and assistance to these individuals with disabilities. My work has included service provision for individuals with a variety of developmental disabilities. The population for which I have found myself most intrigued and my work most useful is with individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Each person is a unique individual with an

array of characteristics which fall on a spectrum. I have supervised a young man with high functioning ASD and found pride in my ability to provide structure and at the same time flexibility with accommodating his specific needs which have led to his successful employment. Supporting someone in a way that allows them to hold a steady job for the first time is rewarding as a professional, but more importantly, improves the quality of life for this young man. Such experiences should be shared with the purpose of providing suggestions to others who may find themselves in similar situations. The value of collaboration on shared experiences are an important factor in studying the views and insights of disability service professionals.

### **Professional Background**

Being a professional in the field of disability services carries a range of emotions. In any given day one can feel competent and confident in their expertise after witnessing an individual reach a milestone or successfully complete a goal. In that same given day one can feel like a complete fraud and failure when an individual does not meet a target, or their parents are not satisfied with the support provided for their loved one. When serving an individual with disabilities there is an expectation on the part of all stakeholders that the service will be of the highest quality. Disability service professionals in higher education are expected to stay up to speed on advances in the field as well as provide guidance and insight to the college administrators on the legal and organizational responsibilities for students with disabilities (Duggan, 2017). Policies are written in response to emerging issues with little guidance from the federal government, so various laws and legislature must be considered when developing procedures. Through collaborative efforts on the part of disability services practitioners, sharing experiences and building relationships can provide for well-prepared professionals who have a support system of colleagues to turn to when guidance is needed on ways to approach a situation.

Such professional support can assist practitioners with navigating through those difficult times when they may question their own expertise.

### **Future Plans**

Building on the body of literature regarding college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a worthwhile contribution in the overall mission of enhancing service provision for this group of individuals. For the purpose of this study, however, the voices of the postsecondary disability services professionals in the state of Mississippi are the focus. There is intent to highlight the professionals who communicate with these students and their families; the staff who not only oversee service delivery, but make the decisions about what services and supports are identified as a need for a student; the people who are reaching out to faculty to be accommodating of the student in their classroom; the staff asking the administration not to cut their budget and actually expand it due to the increased numbers of students seeking supports...these are the focus of this study. An opportunity is presented to listen to these professionals throughout colleges in Mississippi who commit their lives to providing services and supports to this group of traditionally marginalized and underrepresented students. This study provides an examination on how these professionals make decisions regarding service provision, what strategies these professionals believe are best, and why? Participant responses could provide awareness of the types of supports utilized in Mississippi and compare those supports with various colleges throughout the nation. The resources at Mississippi colleges may vary due to budgetary differences and cuts which have impacted colleges throughout the United States. Jackson and Saenz (2021) reported that after adjusting for inflation the school years 2008-2019 showed higher education funding decreased by \$3.4 billion nationally. Thirty-seven states, including Mississippi, cut per-student funding on average 11.6 percent (Jackson & Saenz, 2021).

The professionals on the front line are more than worthy of having their voices heard to make a contribution which could ultimately enhance the lives of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the services provided to them in Mississippi institutions of higher learning.

Clearly there is an assumption on the part of the researcher that the world of higher education is concerned with adequate service provision for college students with disability services. Thelin (2017) discussed the establishment of accessibility in American higher education allowing for college attainment for citizens from diverse backgrounds, and a push for colleges and universities to attract, retain and graduate a diverse student body. Such a consideration could be helpful in urging institutions to provide supports and services which would attract and retain students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) providing the institution with the opportunity to be recognized as a leader in this aspect. Successful degree obtainment for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) would provide colleges and universities with the opportunity to promote open and welcoming college environments for a traditionally marginalized group while also contributing to increased diversity in student enrollment.

#### CARNEGIE PROJECT ON THE EDUCATIONAL DOCTORATE

This dissertation in practice is written in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral program affiliated with the Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate (CPED). The CPED principle regarding ethics, equity, and social justice provides a framework for research involving a problem of practice concerning supports and services for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Studies regarding the educational experiences of students with ASD in the years prior to post-secondary education expose the ostracism and educational barriers encountered by this group of individuals (McMorris et al., 2019; Anderson et al., 2017).

## **Ethics**

Thelin (2017) discussed accessibility and emphasized the drive of colleges and universities for successful degree obtainment among a diverse student body. Institutional responsibility to provide accommodations for a diverse student population should include service provision designed specifically for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) provide ethical guidelines for post-secondary disability service providers which include principles regarding the commitment to educational excellence and quality of life for the students served. There is also an element of professional judgement based on the nature of the student's disability which drives the need for research which could provide more specific guidelines to service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a more individualized manner.

## **Equity**

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties with social communication, sensory impairments, and repetitive or stereotypical behaviors (Pasco, 2018). The research suggests that outcomes are more favorable for children when the intervention is provided as soon as possible and at a greater level of intensity (Pasco, 2018). Healthcare professionals and parents often initiate the need for assessment when a child has not met developmental milestones, however, characteristics are not always detected by clinicians or accepted by caregivers (Pasco, 2018). The sooner a child seeks intervention, the better with the initial service option being early intervention from birth to age three. The public-school systems are then required to develop a plan for children as early as three years of age. Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) noted that schools in the K-12 setting are required by law to provide services to students with a diagnosis as well as develop and adhere to an Individualized Education Plan.

Once a student enters the realm of higher education, however, the student is required to disclose the diagnosis and request services and accommodations (Newman & Madaus, 2014). A study on the service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at the postsecondary level in Mississippi would be intriguing as individuals with disability are required to self-disclose yet, it is likely that individuals with ASD experiences challenges with communication which would make them less likely to self-disclose (Newman & Madaus, 2014). One could argue that the self-discloser requirement is one additional barrier to accessing postsecondary education for this group of students who have already encountered a great deal of educational and social obstacles in their daily lives.

Poverty is another pertinent consideration in regard to equity. Mississippi is a poor state with limited resources, and access to higher education is viewed as an avenue for transcending poverty via well-paid employment (Hill, 2008). The incidence of disability is high among the poor in Mississippi with 37% of impoverished adults being disabled according to the 2000 Census (Hill, 2008). Earning a college degree would allow individuals with disabilities in Mississippi to be eligible for more employment opportunities which could enhance their lives in numerous ways. The varied and complex challenges faced by individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in gaining access to college and the additional hurdles encountered at the post-secondary level highlight the necessity for and significance of a study on service provision for students with ASD in Mississippi.

### **Social Justice**

Mental health and social justice can be linked when one considers experiences regarding fairness, equality, disadvantages and discrimination experienced by a group of marginalized individuals. McMorris et al. (2019) reported that approximately 40-70% of individuals with

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience a mental health issue, which could contribute to the number of students with ASD who do not complete college. Anxiety and depression were commonly noted, and participants expressed the need for more supports in postsecondary education as a result of the stress and anxiety encountered with transitioning to college (McMorris et al., 2019). Study results indicate that students feel services are inadequate and fail to meet their individualized needs (Anderson et al., 2017). As an advocate for individuals whose voices are historically marginalized, a study with a social justice component concerning the supports provided to college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is motivated by students seeking enhanced services.

Approaching postsecondary disability service provision through a disability theory lens allows one to showcase the notions of power and powerlessness when examining the experiences of people with disabilities. Critical disability theory concentrates on undervalued individuals and includes an aim of social justice. Practitioners must work in a collaborative way with the purpose of liberation for individuals with disabilities who may have felt devalued or defined by their impairment even if they do not label themselves as disabled (Hall, 2019).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Supports and service provision for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) typically fall under the oversight of student disability services who provide guidance to faculty and staff regarding accommodations. Practitioners in the field are guided by various professional and philosophical beliefs. Some may be driven by the view that all citizens have the right to a college education, and such access could result in innovative contributions by citizens. Others may be driven by a sense of advocacy with the aim of breaking down barriers of educational elitism for marginalized student groups. And there are some who found themselves

in the field accidentally but have encountered a plethora of experiences which they have built upon and utilized in successful service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

### **The Multi-Disciplinary Nature of Disability Theory**

Disability studies examines the meaning, nature, and consequences of disability. The academic discipline emerged with a focus on the distinction between the social constructed term disability and impairment of the mind or body. Disability studies departs from the medical model of disability where individuals are seen as having a deficiency in need of repair (Cory et al., 2010). When considering such socio-political concepts, the idea of historical structures producing alienation and marginalization come to surface. There is currently increased focus on interdisciplinary approaches and intersectionality which provide insight and understanding for social, political, cultural and economic factors which marginalize and oppress disabled individuals (Hall, 2019).

Feminist theory is worth discussing when considering disability theory. There is an intersection with feminist theory and disability studies concerning oppression found in diverse experiences regarding race, gender and sexuality (Hall, 2019). Garland-Thompson (2002) highlighted the integration of social and political aspects which result in oppression but can allow for empowerment when acknowledging the systems causing repression. The feminist lens aims for accessibility for all, including minority populations and people with disabilities. The intersectionality of disability and feminism could be a lens for which disability services staff view their approach to service provision for students with disabilities, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

One conceptual framework which could provide understanding of how disability services

staff view strategies in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at colleges throughout Mississippi is adapted from Symeonidou (2009) and his model on disability politics through feminism and post modernism. A focus on the intersectionality of disability and feminism in the model is appealing given the social justice component of both disability theory and feminism. The piece of the model which focuses on intersectionality of disability and feminism entails the concept of personal experience with the interaction of identities including personal, social, and national. This conceptual framework could offer insight into the views of the postsecondary disability service practitioners who provide supports and services to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). An examination can be made through this lens regarding the motivation driving their work in disability services, such as descriptions of staff feeling the responsibility to advocate for students due to socially structured oppression or marginalization.

Another area for which the Symeonidou (2009) model could be useful is in examining the experiences and recommendations of postsecondary disability service providers in Mississippi regarding types of services and supports offered to college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Experiences could include examples of services needed due to student experiences with socially structured oppression or marginalization. Professional opinions could flow freely and confidently from the respondents by examining their own suggestions offered from these practitioners on types of service provision guidelines for which they feel are needed to enhance service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Recommendations could include suggestions which break barriers caused by socially structured oppression or marginalization.

Critical disability theory is also worth consideration when considering views of disability services practitioners. Critical disability theory is an emerging discipline which captures a range

of disability conditions and posits these conditions in race, class, gender and sexuality contexts (Hall, 2019). Critical disability theory includes a diverse set of theoretical methods where disability is analyzed as a cultural, historical, and political phenomenon considering social norms which have defined impairments and stigmatization of certain populations (Hall, 2019). Ellis et al. (2018) noted that critical disability theory challenges more traditional disability studies by providing a connection with transformative, intersectional, and coalitional critical work. Consideration is given to the history and construction of disability identity, which is an intriguing concept when one realizes that all humans at any time in life could fall into the category of disabled. Such a label deems one as vulnerable, and one loses a sense of power when considered vulnerable.

The distinction between critical disability theory and more traditional disability studies is ultimately a matter of limitations (Hall, 2019). Disability studies is a synthesis of social constructionism, whereas critical disability theory places disability in political and social realms resisting stigma where an alliance is made with other minority groups who have experienced exclusion and barriers due to the characteristics of their identity (Cory et al., 2010). The more traditional disability studies incorporate civil rights language, minority politics, and social justice contexts to promote a social model of disability focusing on obtaining political inclusion for disabled individuals (Morrow & Malcoe, 2017). The aim of traditional disability studies is to incorporate people into society with the same rights and privileges of all citizens (Linton, 1998). Critical disability theory moves beyond the boundaries of disability studies to include an emancipatory purpose where social and political constructions of how society views disability can be connected to oppression for those labeled as such. Critical disability theory acknowledges the continued struggle for social justice, which is argued by the traditional disability studies. An

additional development, however, is acknowledged which includes psychological, cultural, and sexuality. Viewing disability service provision through the critical disability theory lens could allow for practitioners who are driven by emancipatory student purposes.

### **Law and Personal Experiences**

The views of disability services professionals in higher education may also be guided by law, combined with personal approaches deemed to be successful based on expertise and past experiences. Guzman (2009) found some awareness and utilization of universal approaches to disability service provision in higher education, but it was noted that most practitioners follow individual methods or beliefs when providing accommodations for students while adhering to the federal laws and legislation which are often open to interpretation.

Disability services for American students in postsecondary education became commonplace following legislation such as the GI Bill in 1944 for returning servicemen who were disabled in the war, and “The Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act authorizing the provision of vocational rehabilitation services to civilians injured in industry or any other legitimate occupation” (Guzman, 2009, p. 10). The Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s led to legislation which greatly affected higher education such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004 and amended in 2006) has recently influenced postsecondary service provision as students sixteen and older are required to have an individualized education program (IEP) at the secondary level which includes appropriate and measurable postsecondary goals and transition services (Newman & Madaus, 2015). Societal views and advocacy for college students with disabilities also impact disability service provision in higher education (Guzman, 2009). Common strategies include accommodations for

communication issues, such as notetaking for classroom lectures by a peer, study guides from faculty, allowing students to complete tests in a private space, and coaching for coping strategies (Wheeler, 2014).

### **Quality of Life Approach**

A Quality of Life (QOL) approach has been adopted by disability service providers in and out of the context of higher education. The QOL approach includes the ideas that every person has the right to a life of quality, and that quality of life encompasses many aspects (Friedman, 2018). Disability service provision was historically guided by a medical model where a person with a disability was viewed as having an impairment and the person is therefore seen as “different” from people who do not have the disability or impairment. Tools and supports may be required to correct or remedy the impairment, but it is the responsibility of the individual to identify those tools and supports to manage their condition in the medical model. The social model, on the other hand, differentiates between a medical impairment and the experience of having a disability. Goering (2015) noted an impairment only becomes a disability when there is a mismatch between the individual and the environment which may not be designed for people with a particular disability. Disability service providers guided by a QOL approach attempt to create environments which support the individual’s needs instead of correcting an impairment (Goering, 2015). The QOL approach is one possible lens for studying views of disability service staff in postsecondary education.

### **Person Centered Approach**

Kuder and Accardo (2018) noted that although many colleges and universities have developed supports for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the needs of this unique group of students is often unmet. Wheeler (2014) stated that neurological differences

affect individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in varying ways and there may be unseen challenges which are not recognized by the staff who are supporting these students. Ahlstro and Wentz (2014) report that a person-centered approach is the most efficient method for service provision for individuals with ASD.

Person Centered Planning (PCP) is an approach which emphasizes individual choice, development, and fulfilment through principles of equality, empowerment, and collaboration (Corrigan, 2014). Individuals with disabilities are placed at the center of planning by a collaboration of professional and personal supporters to assist with overcoming barriers to inclusion and participation (Murray & Sanderson, 2007). Corrigan (2014) noted that individuals and their support networks facilitate planning and decision-making to create a shared vision for the future by identifying the individual's strengths and support needs. Placing the individual at the center of the planning process can provide for independence and accountability while the individual builds on community inclusion (Weir, 2004).

Disability service providers in higher education can utilize person centered approaches driven by the preferences and goals of the student with a disability (Weir, 2004). Person centered approaches facilitate positive relationships through collaborative support among the student and their college environment fostering engagement and enhancing the overall postsecondary experience. Freire et al. (2020) noted that although Person Centered Planning does not appear to be commonplace for students with disabilities in postsecondary education, it is found in more informal practices applied by practitioners. A study on the views of disability services staff in postsecondary education for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder will likely consist of participant responses representing a person centered approach.

## **Examination of the Literature**

An examination of the literature on strategies for service provision in postsecondary education for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) revealed various strategies for services and supports. Wheeler (2014) stated that college faculty and staff should become knowledgeable of the various supports needed by students with ASD in order to be successful in the classroom setting and completion of coursework. Each student with ASD is a unique individual with specific needs, but there are common concerns and strategies identified by various service providers regarding communication skills, social skills, sensory differences, motor skills, learning style and coping skills (Wheeler, 2014).

*Communication skills.* Issues with receptive or expressive communication are expected with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, but these issues may be subtle in some college students leading to misunderstandings by peers, faculty or staff (Wheeler, 2014). Basic communication skills that the typical college student possesses such as understanding how to enter or exit a conversation, or simply responding to questions asked, are challenging for an individual with ASD (Denning & Moody, 2018). Brewer, Young, and Barnett (2017) discussed challenges for individuals with ASD with joint attention, the ability to follow someone's eye gaze to an object or using a finger to point to an object; social referencing of non-verbal cues during conversations; and reading intentions to determine if someone is interested in a topic being discussed. Such impairments may be the result of difficulties in interpreting verbal and non-verbal social communications of other individuals, a deficit known as theory of mind (ToM) (Brewer et al., 2017; Baron-Cohen, 1995).

Adding to communication challenges, individuals with ASD often have literal interpretations of words which prevents them from understanding sarcasm and jokes (Wheeler,

2014). A robotic and monotoned voice, combined with idiosyncratic usage of words would without doubt lead to communication challenges with peers, faculty, and staff.

***Strategies for communication challenges.*** Wheeler (2014) noted accommodations for communication issues at colleges and universities often entail providing lecture notes from instructor or a notetaker to ensure key information is recorded; study guides for tests; extended time for verbal responses; and clear concrete instructions from the instructor.

***Social skills.*** Issues with social skills are a core characteristic for the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, and such social challenges may ultimately have an impact on academic success (Wheeler, 2014). Students with ASD may have trouble asking questions in class, participating in classroom discussions, and collaborating with peers in group work (Kuder & Accardo, 2018). Baron-Cohen (1995) developed theory of mind (ToM) referencing the challenges individuals with ASD have with understanding or considering the thoughts and perceptions of others. Understanding that another person's beliefs can differ from their own is often a struggle for college students with ASD, and such challenges can interfere with social interaction among peers (Denning & Moody, 2018). Social deficits can be problematic in young adults with high functioning ASD leaving many with a self-awareness of differences in social functioning, feelings of loneliness, and a lack of friendships (Mitchell et al., 2010; Bauminger & Kasari 2000). Depression, social anxiety, isolation, rejection, teasing, low self-esteem, and dropping out of school are not surprisingly described as outcomes for many young adults with high functioning ASD (Mitchell et al., 2010).

***Strategies for social challenges.*** Wheeler (2014) found that students with ASD benefit from the following faculty methods: providing clear, written rules for asking questions and turn taking in class; allowing for short breaks; being accepting of limited eye contact; pairing students

in groupwork in a way which assures proper inclusion of the ASD student.

***Sensory differences.*** Reactivity to sensory input is another characteristic of the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder and sensory processing challenges appear to affect a large portion of the ASD college student population (Wheeler, 2014). Over or under sensitivity to input from the environment to sight, sound, touch, smell and taste can greatly influence the college experience for an individual with ASD. Typical environmental factors such as flickering florescent lighting, the sound of voices in an adjacent room, or the scent of a classmate's perfume may present painful, distracting or overwhelming sensory issues for the individual.

***Sensory strategies.*** Accommodations for sensory issues could include allowing students with ASD to wear hats and sunglasses to class; allowing the usage of ear plugs; allowing the student to choose a seat; and providing an alternate writing instrument for tests. Being prepared for a student to leave if experiencing sensory overload and having a plan on how to address such behavior is beneficial for all parties (Wheeler, 2014).

***Motor skills.*** Motor difficulties are not a core characteristic of ASD, but various gross and fine motor impairments have been reported for individuals with ASD including difficulties planning and processing motor tasks, referred to as dyspraxia (Travers et al., 2017; Dowell et al., 2009), challenges with postural stability (Travers et al., 2017; Weimer et al., 2001), impaired motor anticipation (Travers et al., 2017), and weak grip strength (Travers et al., 2017; Kern et al., 2013). Atypical development of manual motor skills could even impact one's ability to learn both in and outside the classroom setting (Travers et al., 2017). Writing, turning pages, using a key to unlock a dorm room can present fine motor challenges for the students with ASD (Wheeler, 2014).

***Motor skills strategies.*** Wheeler, M. (2014) noted useful accommodations may include

allowing the usage of a computer for assignments and tests, providing a notetaker, and allowing more time to complete work.

***Learning style.*** Wheeler (2014) noted that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder often exhibit uneven learning profiles such as excelling creatively in a non-conventional way. Many students with ASD have excellent long term and rote memory capabilities, yet they also may possess executive functioning deficits. Organization and planning skills are typically not strengths of an individual with ASD, and college students on the spectrum may be seen as impulsive and unable to self-monitor in regard to completing assignments. Students with ASD often run into issues with the course instructor and peers when they seem argumentative or disinterested due to the need to perspective taking deficits or a need to understand why something is important or deemed meaningful by others. Individuals with ASD typically have a vague sense of time and may not realize they are falling behind on course assignments until they are in a dire academic situation. College students with ASD can do well academically in their field of interest and prove to be quite knowledgeable on the subject, but they may appear disinterested in areas for which they are not interested.

***Learning style strategies.*** Wheeler (2014) listed common accommodations for learning styles could include the faculty providing review sheets and checklists; incorporating sub-deadlines to keep the student on task; utilizing using hands-on learning; and presenting visual aids. Other accommodation which could be helpful for students with ASD include giving reinforcement for completed work; offering students with the opportunity to provide quiet places for test taking; generating calendars with assignments and deadlines; and communicating with the student to determine which tools work best in the new college setting to maintain routines (Wheeler, 2014).

*Coping skills.* College can be a time of transition from the comforts of home or known routines presenting stress, uncertainty, and even anxiety for many college students. Students with ASD experiencing sensory issues, social and communication expectations, and the transition to a new environment may feel extremely overwhelmed to the point that disruptive or strange behavior may be exhibited. Such behaviors may actually be coping skills for the individual that provide a calming sensation for the student. Body rocking, pacing, flapping hands, or abruptly leaving a situation without explanation may be a form of stress relief for the student with ASD.

*Coping skills strategies.* Wheeler (2014) suggested that accommodations for coping skills could include simply asking the student who appears to be distressed if help is needed or if there is a need to be excused from the class/situation. An awareness of the emotional state of students and providing intervention before agitation peaks are strategies often used for reducing anxiety (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Allowing repetitive behavior to occur in the classroom or college setting, allowing for comfort items or objects, and agreeing on a cue to signal if the student feels overwhelmed or confused could be helpful in preventing students with ASD and prevent a classroom disruption in front of peers (Wheeler, 2014).

In reviewing literature, three main areas appeared to emerge as components commonly recommended for service delivery for ASD college students: classroom strategies and pedagogical approaches; academic advising and person-centered approaches; and increased awareness and developmental opportunities for faculty and staff on ASD.

### **Classroom Strategies & Pedagogical Approaches**

Due to increased educational opportunities and life outcomes for individuals with ASD, colleges and universities are experiencing an increase in ASD student enrollment (Hurewitz & Berger, 2008). College staff and faculty, however, are not customarily trained in ways to

effectively support or engage students with ASD. Gobbo and Shmulsky (2013) found that faculty perceptions of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders fit the patterns suggested by prominent theories, including theory of mind, weak central coherence, and executive dysfunction. Participants provided evidence-based teaching strategies for the classroom, and faculty viewpoints on effective teaching practices for students with ASD fell into two categories: providing structure and reducing anxiety (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Using concrete language and making behavioral expectations clear in the beginning of class emerge as suggested approaches for providing structure (Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013).

### **Academic Advising & Person-Centered Approach**

Duggan (2017) suggested academic advising from day one of college with a clear path of what needs to be accomplished along a timeline. Individuals with ASD tend to respond well to structure and concrete plans. Goals needs to be set regarding a student's major so that a plan can be developed, and expectations with deadlines be set for the student to follow. Course selection should also be made based on the special interests of the individual, particularly electives (Duggan, 2017). More research should be done regarding academic advising for college students with ASD as such data was not noted in the previous section regarding common strategies. There is also a significant amount of work encouraging advising and preparation for college at the secondary level (Duggan, 2017; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Colleges and universities are encouraged to develop connections with high schools to promote academic counseling or advising for students with ASD who may find college to be the next step in their journey after high graduation.

Hees et al. (2015) found that students emphasized the need for personalized, individualized and comprehensive supports. A recent study on mentors assigned to college

students with Autism Spectrum Disorder indicated that students are able to directly provide specific needs and goals, and mentors felt a need to tailor the process and supports based on each individual (Roberts & Birmingham, 2017). There appears to be personalization in the common strategies offered by practitioners in supporting students with ASD as the strategies utilized are designed with the student and their needs as the focus of service design.

### **Increased Awareness and Development Opportunities for Faculty and Staff on Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**

Hees et al. (2015) revealed that college students reported a lack of understanding and awareness of ASD among faculty and student counselors. Students with ASD often struggle with social anxiety, so it is not surprising that students who view the university staff as lacking a high level of knowledge about ASD reported stress about the quality of supports that would be provided to them. Awareness programs to break down the perceived stigma and highlight the talents of students with ASD is one suggested strategy noted in the literature (Hees et al., 2015). Faculty are often unaware of the various strategies and supports available for effectively teaching a student on the spectrum (Austin, 2014). This perception was not surprising based on the research and conversations encountered on the topic where faculty have voiced concerns about needing more information on teaching students with ASD (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). There appears to be a need for increased development opportunities for faculty and staff to gain more knowledge, insight and strategies for college students with ASD.

The strategies often implemented by student disability services practitioners for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) mostly align with the recommendations noted by various bodies of work, or at the very least indicate that staff and faculty are attempting to become more knowledgeable about the recommended supports provided in the literature. An

examination of various research, however, revealed a great deal of ASD student dissatisfaction with service provision.

Cai and Richdale (2016) found that many college students with ASD live at home during college, and families often provide significant support for college students with ASD. This group of students and parents felt educational needs were met by the college but believed there was inadequate social support (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Anderson et al. (2017) conducted a systematic literature review which highlighted the challenges and barriers encountered by college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) finding a significant amount of student dissatisfaction with supports which fail to meet the needs and expectations exposing a need for more individualized supports.

Taylor and Seltzer (2011) suggested that current post-secondary supports for college students with ASD are ineffective in meeting the unique needs of this population. Poor academic performance and lower retention rates for students with ASD are likely related to non-academic challenges (Glennon, 2001) making service provision quite challenging for colleges and universities. Findings from Kuder and Accardo (2018) suggest the need for more specialized and individualized non-academic supports to meet the needs of college students with ASD.

The U.S. Department of Education reported in 2011 that almost half of young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have enrolled in college within six years of high school graduation (Sanford et al., 2011). It is evident that enhanced services and supports for students with ASD are needed from colleges and universities. Student disability services professionals seek to provide adequate supports and accommodations for the students enrolled at their respective colleges and universities. Studying the views of these practitioners can be vital in building on the literature regarding service provision for college students with ASD, and

ultimately enhance the quality of the services and supports provided to this population of students.

## METHODOLOGY

This study examines views of staff and faculty at select universities in Mississippi regarding strategies in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in postsecondary education. With an overarching goal of enhanced services for college students with ASD, it is evident that a scholarly practitioner must be willing to listen and seek understanding of the views and experiences of all stakeholders. This allows for new perceptions, which lead to more questions, which ultimately results in better services. This study focuses on the insights and experiences of the disability service providers and faculty in postsecondary education who have valuable information to share with their colleagues and the arena of higher education.

Qualitative research is ideal for data collected in real-world contexts, and the “design can be thought of as a rough sketch to be filled in by the researcher as the study proceeds” (Devers & Frankel, 2000, p. 264). The work in this study is situated in the context of qualitative methodology utilizing open-ended, semi-structured interviews in a focus group format via Zoom. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study given the individualized nature of disability service delivery for college students in postsecondary education and the diverse responses participants could provide throughout the study regarding service provision. Hammer and Wildavsky (1993) described open-ended interviews as provisional with questions being changed or omitted throughout the process. It is methodical, but there is room for variation. The authors recommended approaching the interview as a conversation or guided monologue, where spontaneity on both sides allow for responses and questioning which serve purposes for both parties.

Glesne (2016) described various ethical dilemmas which may be encountered through qualitative research. The Belmont Report is presented as the establishment of three ethical principles guiding human research ethics: respect, beneficence, and justice (Glesne, 2016). The principle of justice discussion seems relevant in a study regarding disability services for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, a population considered to be vulnerable. Glesne (2016) discusses the categorization of vulnerable subjects making their inclusion in research more difficult. Vulnerable people have been oppressed and silenced throughout their lives, and qualitative research is a means for giving voice and awareness to these individuals.

A focus group approach to qualitative inquiry will be conducted for the purpose of this study using open-ended, semi-structured interviews in a focus group format via Zoom with disability services staff and faculty at two research universities in Mississippi. If institutions of higher learning in the state seek to better accommodate students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) by providing sufficient accommodations and supports, then insight from the professionals and faculty implementing service provision for these students should be considered most valuable for such an endeavor.

### **Data Sources**

The data sources for this study will consist of disability services staff and faculty at two four-year research universities in Mississippi. Devers and Frankel (2000) described research design as requiring the examiner to understand and consider the unique characteristics of specific subjects and the settings in which they are located. Colleges within the state of Mississippi will be selected to make the design more concrete. Staff who work in the capacity of student disability services and faculty who have classroom experiences with this group of students are the knowledgeable experts regarding service provision for students with Autism Spectrum

Disorder (ASD), therefore capable of answering the research questions. The study design is an attempt on the part of the researcher to provide adequate control for extraneous variables as the questions posed to the participants will concentrate on subject matters for which these staff and faculty are deemed sufficiently qualified.

This study is designed to be accommodating and flexible to disability services professionals and faculty who may be more likely to participate in a study via Zoom format which is conducive to their work schedule and any concerns regarding social distancing during the COVID pandemic. An attempt to recruit college disability services staff and faculty at two research universities in Mississippi will be made via email after obtaining recommendations for potential participants from the disability services heads at each university. Staff and faculty would be informed of the details of the study and participation would include a focus group via Zoom with colleagues from their institution. The initial email would also ask the staff to complete a short questionnaire regarding students and accommodations at their college or university related to Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The initial email would include a consent form which contains a request for participation in on-going discussion if needed following participation in the focus group. Such follow-up could allow for triangulation and ultimately deeper data which could benefit the students receiving services.

### **Data Collection**

Open-ended, semi-structured, interviews in a focus group format via Zoom will be utilized to gather information from the participants given the varying nature of supports and services provided for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Email queries will be sent out to head disability services staff at two Mississippi colleges asking for recommendations for staff and faculty participants who will be willing to participate during a set

date range, ideally late in the early Fall 2021 academic semester. Emails requesting participation in the study would be disseminated once potential participants are identified by the disability services heads at the two universities. This is the aforementioned email which would contain a consent to participate in a focus group via Zoom, and a questionnaire regarding students and accommodations related to ASD. The correspondence and data collection would begin once a participant sends a response email with a completed consent form and finished questionnaire.

A discussion would be facilitated on the topic of students at the college with ASD and the various accommodations provided for those students. There are three big picture sets of questions guiding the overall purpose of the study, so the focus group discussion would be guided by those three overarching queries. Prompts will be utilized during the discussion to assist in facilitating and generate richer participant responses. There is room, however, for flexibility in changing the content and the number of prompts.

Advantages of unstructured interviews include detailed information as the researcher is permitted to gather in-depth information from the participant (Glesne, 2016). Flexibility is also advantageous as the researcher can adapt to developments which may arise during the course of the study. The nature of an unstructured interview should provide for a more real conversational feel to the inquiry and allow for more detailed and accurate descriptions from the participants. The researcher anticipates the unstructured interview to be an advantageous approach as participant responses may vary greatly given that there is no mandated set of accommodations provided for colleges and universities for providing services and supports for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

### **Data Analysis**

Data will be gathered to draw meaning from the focus group recording via Zoom by

coding for themes which will likely emerge in the transcription process. The video recording of the focus group discussion will be uploaded and transcribed by an outside source such as Rev.com into a Word document. Themes should emerge in the data which will consist of participant responses. The researcher will include the sources to support data analysis and is cognizant of the potential changes that may occur in data collection considering the varying nature of postsecondary disability service provision for student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). All responses will remain anonymous when reporting data collection.

### **Ethical Issues**

The researcher will conduct this study as a doctoral student at the University of Mississippi and will seek approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to protect the rights and welfare of the study participants. As an ethical practitioner all guidance from the IRB will be maintained. Pending approval, study participants will be provided via email with information about the study, including two attached documents: consent form to be emailed back to the researcher; and an information sheet regarding the research details for the participant to reference if needed. Data will not be collected until the consent form has been returned by the participant. Consent forms will be electronically stored with all research documents in a folder on the researcher desktop which requires a secure password for access to be granted. Any issues described in the email correspondence which may reveal the identity of a student will be redacted.

The participants will be selected by on-line staff directories for disability service administrators and faculty at two research universities in Mississippi after being recommended by disability services heads at each institution. These individuals are deemed as professional staff and communication will be maintained through work/organizational email therefore, the consent

and identity of the correspondence should be valid.

### **Research Questions**

This study examines views of staff and faculty at select universities in Mississippi regarding strategies in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in postsecondary education. The researcher is prepared for unanticipated data results considering the varying nature of service provision for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. As data is retrieved, questions may be modified throughout the study. In addressing this problem of practice, however, three questions which guide the overall purpose of this study have been identified:

1. How are postsecondary disability services staff and faculty in Mississippi motivated to serve students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
2. Based on their experiences, how do postsecondary disability service providers and faculty in Mississippi identify the most beneficial types of services and supports offered to college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
3. What are the approaches or resources which could allow for postsecondary disability services practitioners and faculty in Mississippi to enhance service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

## MANUSCRIPT TWO

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are entering institutions of higher learning at increasing rates believed to make up roughly one to two percent of the postsecondary student population (Cox & South, 2017; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as cited in Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). The increase in this student population can be attributed to factors including increased awareness of learning differences, enhanced identification and diagnosis processes, improved individual learning plans, and more effective special education practices (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Transitioning from the K-12 experience where schools are required by law to provide adequate supports and services, these students and their families bring with them to higher education an expectation of satisfactory supports and services (Chan, 2016; Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). As ASD student enrollment increases, so does the need for enhanced disability service provision.

The available supports and services is concerning for some college students with ASD and their families as graduation rates for this group of students remain low at 41% (Cox & South, 2017). White et al. (2016) reported that students with ASD are almost twenty percent less likely than peers without ASD to receive degrees. Fears regarding employment, quality of life, and independent living can be present in these students and their families, but there is also the concern that communities and society may miss out of benefiting from citizens who could potentially be productive members of the workforce (Feinstein, 2018). It would benefit the students with ASD, their families, their communities, the workforce and society as a whole for

colleges to commit to enhancing supports and services for students with ASD.

Postsecondary disability service provision includes guidelines and restrictions which cause limitations and challenges to the level of intervention colleges can provide for students with ASD. There is a wide range of functioning associated with ASD resulting in a need for diverse and individualized postsecondary supports and accommodations (Wheeler, 2014). College students who have an ASD diagnosis do not necessarily have the same characteristics, learning styles, social skills or needs (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Such an array creates a sense of uniqueness to the types of supports needed in institutions of higher learning (Wheeler, 2014). The K-12 setting is required to provide services to students with a diagnosis as well as develop and adhere to an Individualized Education Plan. Students must self-disclose, however, in the postsecondary world to qualify for services (Blackwell & Rosetti, 2014). Self-disclosure is completely voluntary, and many students who received disability services or accommodations in the K-12 setting do not self-disclose when transitioning to college (Newman & Madaus, 2014). Reasons for not disclosing vary, with some fearing the stigma attached to receiving supports from disability services. Others are fraught with communication uncertainty or social anxiety. Another possibility is that students feel more confident in their ability to achieve academic success at this point in life without intervention (Newman & Madaus, 2014; Martin, 2010). It is a challenge for postsecondary disability services professionals, however, as services unintentionally go unprovided to a student as a result of the institution not being made aware of the student's needs via self-disclosure.

Despite the challenges associated with the requirement for self-disclosure, professionals in the field of postsecondary disability services strive to provide adequate supports to the students with ASD. People find themselves in disability service provision for various reasons and

such variety also exists in their practices and philosophical views. Some may build from Labaree (1997) and democratic equality with a view of disability services as a public good. Others may be guided by disability theory and providing the student with opportunities, tools and support to decide what is best for themselves (Cory et al., 2010). It is also likely that many disability service professionals are not necessarily guided by a particular philosophical view of services, but rather building from experiences and situations which have been presented throughout their personal and professional lives. Working in the field of service provision for historically marginalized or vulnerable citizens often results in increased advocacy for those you serve, as well as a pursuit for social justice and equity for these individuals. It is not unlikely that disability service professionals feel compelled to advocate for these students and to seek ways to enhance the supports and services provided by their institutions.

Regardless of guiding principles or theories, the professionals in the field of disability services are a source of expertise, insight and understanding regarding students with ASD. This study was designed to provide these professionals with the opportunity to share their experiences and also discuss ways in which service provision can be enhanced. Interventions and supports from colleges and universities are needed to increase the likelihood that students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) will be successful in degree obtainment. This study examines views of staff and faculty at select universities in Mississippi regarding strategies in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in postsecondary education.

This study is driven by a career spanning over twenty years in the field of service provision for individuals with various types of developmental disabilities. Having an awareness of the challenges historically marginalized individuals have encountered with the barriers of educational exclusivity motivates the need for a study highlighting supports which could

alleviate challenges encountered by students with ASD. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) noted that the approach and design of a study and the findings are influenced by the position from which the researcher perceives the world. There is a personal yearning to build upon the literature regarding postsecondary students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), not just as a scholarly practitioner, but also as an advocate and service provider for individuals with disabilities.

The views and the voices of the postsecondary disability services professionals in the state of Mississippi are the focus of this study. This study provides an examination of the various supports and services offered by professionals at Mississippi colleges for students with ASD, including the challenges encountered in service provision and the desired enhancements which could benefit their respective institutions. These professionals are charged with not only serving the students, but also their institutions. Thelin (2017) discussed the establishment of accessibility in American higher education allowing for college attainment for citizens from diverse backgrounds. If colleges in Mississippi want to enhance ASD student service provision, providing exemplary supports and services could attract and retain students while providing the institution with the opportunity to be recognized as a leader in postsecondary ASD disability services.

A review of the literature noted common strategies for service provision in postsecondary education for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). These supports, however, cannot be left solely up to the office of disability services to provide. Wheeler (2014) stated that both faculty and staff should become knowledgeable of the various supports which foster academic success. Common supports and strategies identified in the literature often included supports for communication skills, social skills, sensory differences, motor skills, learning style and coping skills (Wheeler, 2014). Three main areas appeared to emerge as components commonly

recommended for service delivery: classroom strategies and pedagogical approaches; academic advising and person-centered approaches; and increased awareness and developmental opportunities for faculty and staff on ASD (Duggan, 2017; Hees et al., 2015; Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013).

The supports and strategies often provided for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) typically align with recommendations from research, or the sense that staff and faculty are attempting to provide supports which lead to student success. The literature revealed frequent ASD student dissatisfaction as poor academic performance and lower retention rates are presented (Glennon, 2001). Glennon (2001) noted that poor academic performance and low graduation rates could be attributed to non-academic challenges, such as social issues, making service provision challenging for colleges and universities. With ASD student enrollment on the rise, however, it is evident that enhanced services and supports for students with ASD are needed in higher education (Sanford et al., 2011). Studying the views of the disability services practitioners is an attempt to contribute to the body of literature regarding ASD college student service provision, and ultimately improve the supports provided to this population of students.

## DATA PRESENTATION

This study examines views of staff and faculty at select universities in Mississippi regarding strategies in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in postsecondary education. The focus of the research is on the insights and experiences of the disability services providers in postsecondary education. Glesne (2016) described qualitative researchers as attempting to make connections from the behavior and narratives of subjects. Two institutions in the state comparable in size and type were selected in an attempt to find such connections in the professional views of ASD student service provision. Findings could be valuable for institutions

of higher learning in Mississippi seeking to enhance ASD student supports. The work in this study is situated in the context of qualitative methodology utilizing open-ended, semi-structured interviews in a focus group format via Zoom. Three guiding questions were utilized in the study to address the problem of practice:

1. How are postsecondary disability services staff and faculty in Mississippi motivated to serve students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
2. Based on their experiences, how do postsecondary disability service providers and faculty in Mississippi identify the most beneficial types of services and supports offered to college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
3. What are the approaches or resources which could allow for postsecondary disability services practitioners and faculty in Mississippi to enhance service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

A focus group approach to qualitative inquiry was implemented for the purpose of this study. Postsecondary disability services delivery is typically quite individualized, and such unique and varied supports would likely result in diverse participant responses. Guided by the work of Glesne (2016), open-ended, semi-structured interviews appeared to be an advantageous approach in yielding detailed and in-depth responses. Utilizing the three guiding research questions in the interviews would keep the discussion on track while allowing the opportunity for unanticipated responses to occur and be further employed in the conversation. Unexpected replies could shift questioning and enrich the data by revealing information or insights not yet considered or examined. The focus group discussion design with the three guiding questions would be flexible enough to allow for variations while maintaining focus on the overall purpose of the study.

There appears to be a growing amount of research on the experiences of college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, the types of services often provided, and even recommended supports described to have successful outcomes (Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). The nature of the data available regarding the views on ASD supports by disability services professionals, however, does not seem to be as prevalent. Paskins (2018) was the first study noted to use an expert panel of disability service professionals to identify services and supports that can most benefit students with ASD as they enter postsecondary educational settings. Disability services professionals are the primary providers of academic supports and accommodations for students with ASD. These professionals have the potential to determine student success via support and services (Paskins, 2018).

Witcher (2020) conducted a qualitative study of postsecondary disability services professionals from four-year public universities in Michigan. The intent of the research was to analyze the perceptions of these professionals regarding the transition process from secondary to postsecondary education for students with ASD (Witcher, 2020). The researcher provided an opportunity to “render a narrative and rich voice for describing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in relationship to the phenomenon of students with ASD attending college” (Witcher, 2020, p. 147). The findings of the study revealed the need for enhanced advocacy for ASD students, and further collaboration to close gaps between the transition from secondary to postsecondary education.

Institutions of higher learning appear to recognize the vital role disability service professionals play in postsecondary ASD student success and see the value in staff development and training opportunities to enhance supports. A collaborative effort in 2014 including Eastern University, Mercyhurst University, Rutgers University-New Brunswick, The University of

Tennessee at Chattanooga, University of West Florida and Western Kentucky University resulted in the development of resource containing written guidelines and suggestions. *Emerging Practices for Supporting Students on the Autism Spectrum in Higher Education: A Guide for Higher Education Professionals* is a manual developed by the Rochester Institute of Technology in conjunction with the aforementioned institutions of higher learning. These colleges recognized the significant increase in ASD student enrollment and the need for enhanced supports. The lack of information concerning effective support models and strategies led to the formation of the manual. The guide was provided to facilitate the development of postsecondary initiatives nationwide and provide higher education professionals with a systematic and practical resource for developing an institutional ASD support model (Rochester Institute of Technology, 2014).

Kim (2021) conducted a national study consisting of disability service professionals completing on-line surveys on their attitudes and knowledge of college students with ASD. The survey also included questions regarding experiences with individuals on the spectrum prior to their work in disability services, and demographic characteristics. The inherent mechanisms between institutional variables and the attitudes and knowledge regarding ASD were explored to understand what types of supports and training is needed to promote collaborative relationships between disability service professionals and students with ASD.

Disability service professionals in higher education are a vital part of ASD student success, but these experts in the field cannot be expected to accomplish this task alone. The role of the faculty and the administration are crucial components of needed collaboration required to make enhancing ASD student supports an institutional priority. Austin (2014) documented pedagogical approaches of supportive faculty members regarding students with ASD. Austin noted that the direct relationship between the student with ASD and the faculty member

determines academic success in a course. The student-teacher relationship can impact the academic success of that student, so faculty awareness and support is important in overall ASD student support enhancement (Austin, 2014).

College students with ASD may have adequate cognitive ability for academic success but lack the social or coping skills for degree obtainment. Students are not required to disclose their diagnosis, and characteristics of ASD often go unnoticed in the classroom until sensory issues, social deficits, learning styles and organizational challenges negatively impact academic achievement (US Autism and Asperger Association, 2013). There is a need for faculty development opportunities regarding potential strategies and supports which could be utilized if they encountered students exhibiting the characteristics commonly associated with ASD. Austin (2014) found that supportive faculty seemed driven by a need to carry out social change on a larger scale regarding issues of diversity, access, and student equity. Any faculty member striving for student success and social justice would likely be receptive to information which could provide the skills to help ASD students overcome challenges and obtain academic achievement.

Support from the college administration is critical in fostering a culture of support for students with ASD. Access to funds can be a challenge for many in higher education and disability service provision is often limited by lack of resources. Caldora noted that American higher education is an individualized experience not only among the students, but also among institutions (Stairway to STEM). The same can be said for ASD student supports and resources at various postsecondary institutions. The services offered throughout US institutions of higher learning are diverse, and the funding or resources available for those services vary. Caldora asserted that the differing levels of support may be a result of the priority a particular college

places on ASD student services (Stairway to STEM). Institutional mission and the amount of available resources also determine the levels of support provided for ASD students. Some institutions offer dedicated resources for ASD students, and some colleges may charge a fee for such specialized programs (Stairway to STEM).

An overview of the data available regarding views of postsecondary disability service professionals regarding ASD student support appears to be situated mostly in qualitative studies conducted by organizations and scholars advocating for students with ASD. These studies tend to consist of a small number of participants and have mostly been carried out in the last five to ten years. One common issue noted in studies on postsecondary disability service professionals' views of ASD supports is the lack of student disclosure. Colleges and universities do not know the number of ASD student enrollment as a result of students not disclosing to the office of disability services. Disability services professionals may not be aware of a student in need of supports or accommodations if that student has not disclosed. Sparks (2020) discussed the rates of disclosing ASD in higher education. Disclosure decreases as students transition from high school to college, and students usually only disclose if there is encouragement to do so by a professional or if they have a substantial need for an academic or social accommodation (Sparks, 2020).

The lack of disclosure may present limitations or deficits in the data given the participants are not certain about ASD student enrollment or the number of students needing supports (US Autism and Asperger Association, 2013). Studies reveal, however, the need for continued research on the topic to build upon the new material which could ultimately lead to student success for a historically marginalized group of students. Providing the disability services professionals with the opportunity to discuss the needs of their institutions to provide

improved supports could be instrumental in justifying the need for institutions of higher learning to make enhancing ASD student services a priority. This study is designed with the intent to share the voices of the professionals through discussions providing insight, experiences, and recommendations for ASD student disability services provision.

## PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

The data sources for this study consisted of disability services staff at two, four-year, research universities in Mississippi. An initial email was sent in September 2021 to each of the disability services directors at these two colleges seeking suggestions for potential staff and faculty participants from their respective institutions. The study was intentionally designed to begin the recruitment efforts with the disability service heads at each university for not only suggestions on potential participants, but to also evoke buy-in and support for the study from these influential professionals. Both directors of disability services responded to my messages with participant suggestions and expressed their own interest in partaking in the study. Both professionals recommended that staff from housing be invited to contribute in the study given the requests for housing accommodations often made by students with ASD. One institution has a program designed specifically for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), so the coordinator for that program was recommended by the disability services director of that college. Both directors shared the e-mail with their department staff to see if any of the disability services professionals were interested in participating in the study. These suggestions were utilized when identifying e-mail addresses from each of the on-line university employee directories. Other professionals who seemed likely to have encountered requests for accommodations were also sent e-mail invitations, such as campus recreation staff and faculty development professionals. Various faculty were also identified as potentially having knowledge of or experience with

supports and services for students with ASD, such as faculty from Psychology Departments and Education Departments at each university.

Utilizing the aforementioned process, e-mails were sent in October 2021 to numerous staff and faculty at each institution with an invitation to participate in a study on supports and services for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The e-mail invitation included an information sheet regarding the research details for the participant to reference if needed, a Google doc link in the body of the message for a brief questionnaire, and an attached consent form to participate in a one-hour focus group in the Fall 2021 semester via Zoom with colleagues from their institution. The consent form included a request for participation in ongoing discussion following the focus group if needed. Glesne (2016) discussed the value in acknowledging the importance of the subject giving time, cooperation, and words to the study, so a statement regarding how valuable the insight, experience and expertise could be in a study regarding supports and services for college students with ASD in Mississippi was also included in the body of the electronic message.

Swift interest and confirmation to participate in the study came as soon as the day after the invitations were sent via e-mail. Participants who responded with curiosity stated that they may be interested in participating in the focus group via Zoom if their schedules permit. Others returned the completed consent form enthusiastically confirming participation in the study and completing the brief anonymous questionnaire. There were two potential participants who expressed interest by completing the Google doc questionnaire but were not able to commit to taking part in the study. There was a small amount of faculty interest, but no faculty agreed to participate in the study due to heavy workloads in the Fall semester. E-mail correspondence continued with interested staff throughout the month of October 2021 to determine availability to

participate in the study. A link for a Doodle poll was e-mailed in late October to all who expressed interest in the study. The survey contained a set of dates and times for individuals to select regarding availability to partake in a one-hour focus group discussion via Zoom.

Interested subjects completed the Doodle poll, and a date and time for each institution was selected to accommodate all who completed the survey. Five participants from one institution confirmed participation in the focus group discussion via Zoom scheduled for early November. Six participants from a second institution confirmed participation in the focus group discussion via Zoom scheduled for mid-November. A Zoom meeting was generated, and a link to participate in the assigned focus group discussion was e-mailed to all participants. Reminder e-mails were sent to the participants in the days leading up to each of the assigned Zoom focus group discussions.

### **Focus Group One**

The first focus group discussion via Zoom was set for early November with five postsecondary professionals from a four-year, public, research university in the state of Mississippi. This group of participants consisted of the disability services director, the coordinator for a program designed by the university specifically for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), and three housing staff. Prior to the focus group discussion via Zoom, all five participants completed a brief Google doc questionnaire when they consented to participate in the study. All five participants indicated that they had provided services, supports or classroom instruction to college students with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. All five participants confirmed that those students had been officially registered with the office of disability services at their institution. All five participants confirmed that the students they served seemed satisfied with the supports received from the University.

The participants were informed of the intent of the study before the focus group discussion began as the following statement was read out loud by the researcher: *I want to seek information regarding current supports and services offered by your university for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I hope that you all will be able to share your experiences and any strategies you utilize or have shown to be effective. I've reached out to you all to gain valuable insight. If students with Autism seek enhanced supports from colleges across the state, then I feel it is important that the voices of the professionals carrying out these supports be heard.*

Each contributor was given the opportunity to introduce themselves at the beginning of the discussion, and the participants stated they were familiar with one another. There was talk about how the housing staff often work with the office of disability services and the program designed by the University for students with ASD. The discussion was guided by three overarching questions:

1. How are postsecondary disability services staff and faculty in Mississippi motivated to serve students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
2. Based on their experiences, how do postsecondary disability service providers and faculty in Mississippi identify the most beneficial types of services and supports offered to college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
3. What are the approaches or resources which could allow for postsecondary disability services practitioners and faculty in Mississippi to enhance service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

**Table 1**

<i>Focus Group 1</i>
Participants
Disability Services Head Autism Program Coordinator 3 Housing Staff
Anonymous Survey Prior to Focus Group Discussion:
All 5 participants indicated that they had provided services, supports or classroom instruction to college students with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.
All 5 participants confirmed that those students had been officially registered with the office of disability services at their institution.
All 5 participants confirmed that the students they served seemed satisfied with the supports received from the University.

The first inquiry was concerning how postsecondary disability services staff and faculty in Mississippi are motivated to serve students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)? The participants responded by sharing various experiences and backgrounds which raised their interest in supporting students with ASD. Some reported an additional drive they felt to help all students be successful in higher education. All five participants reported experiences in their professional career or personal life with people who had developmental disabilities. One participant described experience in a clinical setting as well as psychological consulting work with K-12 school systems. Another participant disclosed having a board-certified behavior analyst credential. These two professionals received specialized training in supporting people with developmental disabilities, including Autism Spectrum Disorder. One participant from housing shared being motivated in the work to support students with ASD from having a family member on the spectrum. This professional also referred to the influence from being raised by parents who provided supports for individuals with physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. One of the participants with professional credentialing and training in the field of

behavior analysis discussed the motivation for enhanced ASD services driven by employment and college success.

Speaker 1: “There's not a lot out there for supporting and getting people employed, getting people through college. So, I have definitely gained a larger passion for working with adults specifically with those disabilities...”

Two of the housing participants talked about interests in becoming more knowledgeable on the types of supports and services available to college students with ASD. Both shared examples of providing accommodations for students on the spectrum in their professional roles. One contributor emphasized a desire to learn more about building relationships with people on the spectrum to help determine what supports might be beneficial for a student.

Speaker 3: “...I think realizing that the needs of students on the spectrum are a little different, and so there's a lot more time focused, not only on the students, trying to help them and get them to resources, but also working with their siblings that are taking care of them, in some cases, and their family and stuff like that. So that's particularly why I'm interested in joining this conversation just because it's been helpful in helping me grow.”

This participant also shared that building relationships with ASD students over the years revealed that college success for students requires connections with people who are understanding and comforting. Novotney (2014) referred to the heightened challenges for ASD students when encountering academic stress, struggles with time management, and social interactions. Providing support in these areas for ASD students could further develop the skills needed to be successful in completing college. These supports would be beneficial to the average student in a college setting.

Speaker 4: “...I learned and built a lot of relationships with those residents. So for me, it's

been a passion for me just to help any student as much as I can, no matter what's going on.”

The second part of the discussion was guided by participant experiences in determining how postsecondary disability service providers and faculty in Mississippi identify the most beneficial types of services and supports offered to college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder? When asked to categorize the types of requests often made by students with ASD, a range of services was discussed. Accommodations for test taking and assignments were noted as frequent requests. The disability services staff found that ASD students often need help with social skills or communication limitations. Participants discussed how ASD communication issues are often interpreted as the student seeming unsure of themselves or lacking confidence. Disability services regularly encourages ASD students to utilize the Autism program at the University for communication assistance or support. It was reported that students regularly need help with initiating communication with a professor to seek clarification or help regarding an assignment.

The disability services professionals talked in great length about college students having to disclose to the office of disability services before accommodations can be requested. The requirement on the part of the student often results in a lack of disclosure. Unfortunately, the students will not disclose until they are behind in class or have encountered a major issue for which they now need support. The participants discussed the contrast in disability services from K-12 to postsecondary education. Law and legislation require schools to provide accommodations documented in an IEP for early learners through secondary education. One participant noted, however, that the student does not learn to advocate for themselves or make requests for services due to the schools being mandated to provide accommodations.

Speaker 1: "... in the K-12 setting, parents are primed early to advocate for their son or daughter and help them get the most that they possibly can in the school setting...not giving the skills for...self-advocacy."

Disability services staff discussed a reliance on the student to disclose a need and request accommodations, but the outcome is students do not always disclose. The participants expressed concerns about students who do disclose and report a diagnosis, but do not follow the guidance of the professionals or utilize the available services.

Speaker 2: "I don't always push back against the direction the student is wanting to go, but I find myself not infrequently troubled by that decision."

The participants from housing joined in with descriptions of frequent private room requests as students and their parents appear to have housing concerns upon admission to the University. One disability services professional voiced apprehension, however, regarding private room requests. This contributor did acknowledge that a student with ASD may find it challenging to successfully navigate a relationship with a roommate. The staff felt the opportunity to build on those skills, however, would be advantageous to the student.

Speaker 2: "I find myself troubled by the requests for single rooms by students with Autism. I don't know if it's always in their best interest to have a private room... trying to learn how to connect with others is delayed, in terms of going to a single room."

The housing participants spoke about recurrent meetings with the disability services staff and the coordinator for the University Autism program. A strong line of communication between these programs/departments was detected in the conversation. Housing participants described meetings with staff from disability services and the University Autism program to help identify common characteristics of the diagnosis and unique challenges they may encounter with ASD

students. Residential staff spoke about encouraging students to register with disability services when such challenges are presented. One housing participant reflected on a student who was not initially registered with disability services but had found support and encouragement from the residential staff. The participant stated that the staff utilized the information and training they had received from disability services and the University Autism program. It was noted that the student proved to be successful in working the front desk and eventually became a resident advisor on campus. The housing participants voiced having confidence on the actions to take when an ASD student issue arises.

Speaker 3: “Most of the students, if they want to talk, they know where to go to, or they're directed to disability services and having the resources we have at [this institution] has helped a lot more in our department.”

The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) noted restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior which can be manifested by insistence on sameness and inflexibility. One housing participant discussed how a change in routine often raises awareness of an issue or a need for support. The residential staff can encourage the student to disclose to disability services so housing can collaborate with the experts in the field on the best steps moving forward.

Speaker 5: “When a student is in crisis or something is going wrong, we didn't know they were on the spectrum, but that's where we find out and recognize the issue.”

The University Autism program was referenced often throughout the discussion which is offered for degree seeking students. The program is partially funded by a grant, and there is a small group of staff assigned to the program. A great deal of the work is also conducted by graduate students from the psychology department and the Applied Behavior Analysis program.

In addition to this degree seeking program for students on the spectrum, the institution also offered a certificate program for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Those students attend various classes and courses on social skills and independent living skills. The students do not earn a degree but do obtain a certificate for completing the program. The respondents spoke about the specialized supports offered from the Autism program for degree seeking students and the value placed in the program as a University resource. One participant shared how the program was created in 2014 in response to the practitioners recognizing that students with ASD were struggling with self-advocacy.

Speaker 1: "...as students come up through the special education process and IEPs...we spend a lot of time as adults talking about our students and not giving the skills for the self-advocacy piece..."

ASD students who enroll in the University Autism program are not charged a fee as the program adheres to the approach that students should not pay extra for social supports inherently needed by the nature of the diagnosis. The University Autism program was referenced as a University effort to raise awareness of supports available for the ASD students. It was noted that the program has grown to become a campus social networking tool for people who need guidance with making connections to feel like part of the college atmosphere. The program was described as providing various supports including social interactions, communication skills, self-care, managing relationships with roommates, and employment skills. Students are assisted with utilizing the career center and state agencies, such as vocational rehabilitation, to establish employment connections for post-graduation. It was reported that social events are held throughout the school year to establish networks with peers and the university community. The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)

provides standardized criteria for diagnosing an individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) including deficits in social communication and social interaction. The University program was described as placing great value in providing social supports which are characteristic of the diagnosis.

Speaker 1: “Socials to bridge some of the pieces to help people connect...create a safe place.”

The participants discussed the various social supports provided to students at the University via the Autism program. There was an interesting conversation regarding socials and event nights for ASD students. One of the unscripted prompts generated from the discussion was envisioning a social and what that would look like for a group of ASD students.

Speaker 2: “They're a blast. I mean, but we kind of do a variety of different things. So we'll do community... We've started to move more towards not artificial socials, like creating our own things, but we would do like game nights and stuff. So video games or whatever, we would do those, and we're trying to tap into things that the students like. So video games, we've done board game nights, we'll go out to eat, we'll go to a movie. But now we've started to plug more into like let's figure out some campus events that are happening or really trying to campus community types of activities. We were there, and we would say like, we're literally... I stopped showing up because I was like... all of a sudden I was the old guy there and it's like, nobody wants that. This is supposed to be a bunch of college people getting together and just hanging out and that's really the flavor that we want to give that, so I stopped going.”

The discussion of the University Autism program elicited concerns from the participants about the types of supports and services offered for ASD college students at most colleges

throughout the nation. It was celebrated that there appears to be an increase in postsecondary programs designed for students with ASD, but such efforts are still not commonplace in institutions of higher learning. It was further noted that there are not many programs in the country available for colleges students with ASD at an additional cost.

Speaker 1: “Some do charge, sometimes fairly hefty fees, for the additional support.”

This University Autism program does not cost additional fees, therefore, there are fewer expectations placed on the students regarding their level of participation. It was discussed that students have the autonomy to determine their level of participation in the program. One participant referred to some colleges which charge a fee for Autism supports, but also require the students to sign a contract placing commitment and accountability for utilizing the supports offered throughout the program.

Another concern which emerged during the conversation was the need for more collaboration with K-12 professionals to ease the transition from high school to college for students as well as parents.

Speaker 1: “A little bit more needs to happen to help with that transition or help students kind of be successful and connected on campus. There isn't people reaching out to you saying you have to go to disability offices or professors and say, This is what I need to be successful.”

Discussion of the transition from secondary education to college sparked a conversation on parental involvement. Participants reported on experiences with parents who often seem to be driving the requests for accommodations. The respondents spoke about the desire to see students advocate for themselves and their needs, instead of the parents. Disability studies theory argues the advocacy piece on the part of the individual to identify what is needed and having the right

to make the request. (Cory, White & Stuckey, 2010).

Speaker 2: “Oftentimes the parent is the one that actually typed in the student's request...so they're doing everything for the student...I actually ask the parent to let the student speak...A parent of a graduate student came in with him and was doing all the talking for him. This student was 22 or 23 years old, and the parent is still doing accommodation requests.”

Speaker 3: “We deal with most of the parents and taking over and things. This is a growing trend across all of higher education. I feel like I talk to more parents than students initially because they don't let go.”

Speaker 5: “...doesn't end with students on the spectrum, that's all students with the parent involvement.”

The participants shared concerns about the level of parental involvement being detrimental for the students and the staff providing supports, A viewpoint was revealed, however, potentially explaining this parental phenomenon. It was noted that University Autism staff have conversations with parents about allowing the student with the opportunity to navigate the process of making requests and having more say in the decision making. There was discussion about the parents not having the skills to step back and gradually remove some of the supports over time. Stepping back could provide the students with the opportunity to be more independent.

Speaker 1: “Generally higher education is one where we're seeing a lot more parent involvement. Parents having a hard time letting go and not trusting that their student has the skills necessary... the skills necessary to survive campus on their own. No trust with normal, independent living sort of functioning aspect of the day-to-day piece. No trust

with the social, meeting people and getting out and doing things. Parent involvement tends to hinder their ability to actually do some of those things. Challenging to have parent interference in a lot of those... parents that'll write emails posed as the student, but it's actually the parents. Parents don't have the skills or training that they need to pull back appropriately and effectively.”

The final part of the discussion was guided by approaches or resources which could allow for postsecondary disability services practitioners and faculty in Mississippi to enhance service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The participants were asked to describe the culture and level of ASD student acceptance at the university. The conversation began with a contributor sharing experiences with an ASD student intern for housing:

Speaker 3: “The student really loves it here. Has a lot of friends and seems to be really getting a good experience out of what we have here.”

Another participant spoke about the University and the organizational commitment to fostering a culture of acceptance. It was noted that the University has established affiliation and services for citizens with disabilities which benefit the community. In addition to the University Autism program, the participants referenced a certificate program offered at the college for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). There was discussion about the institutional efforts made to create opportunities which provide access to higher education for individuals who have historically encountered significant barriers to postsecondary education. One participant noted that the most successful students to come through the University Autism program are those that utilize the services offered by the college.

The participants talked about an increasing interest from faculty and staff and their participation in various training opportunities on campus. It was noted that forty faculty and staff

participate on average in bi-annual trainings. The disability services staff spoke about the faculty being quite receptive to supporting ASD students and willing to take the steps to help a student succeed. It was noted that the faculty seek guidance on how to provide the appropriate supports within the law, but also see the value in these suggested strategies for all students.

Speaker 1: “There is a focus on universal design for learning and more broad accommodations or approaches that can help all students.”

As the conversation turned to the desired enhancements for ASD supports at the University, the participants spoke about concerns regarding student disclosure. It was expressed that the lack of student disclosure causes limitations in the current service provision. One participant talked about the struggles encountered with being unable to divulge sensitive information to staff or faculty. The staff pointed out that a professional cannot identify students in a classroom who have ASD. The student must be the person to choose to inform the instructor of their diagnosis and potential needs. It was detailed that faculty and staff often display disappointment by not having access to the knowledge of who in the class has ASD. It was believed that the faculty want to implement the strategies and supports in an effort to do what is best for the student, but they feel limited by not knowing who has the ASD diagnosis.

Speaker 1: We have supports helpful for students with Autism, but can't disclose who it is needing the supports.”

Speaker 2: “There is a lack of sharing information because we can't disclose. Faculty may need more information than typically received through the usual accommodations.

Faculty may encounter a student whose way of relating is just difficult enough for a new faculty member to understand and might be misread by faculty.”

When considering ways to improve services, challenges were noted with convincing

students to utilize the opportunities offered by the University. Participants stated that more students need supports than are actually registered with disability services, and there is an issue with students not seeking assistance.

Speaker 1: "...that don't come to us at all, and yes, there are definitely more statistically, there are more students on campus with Autism than what we currently serve. It's 75 is what [disability services] currently has registered. It's just that's it. There are more students with Autism on this campus. Part of that is just not wanting to be identified and be... students see it as being treated differently or a handholding kind of situation."

Respondents talked about the stigma attached to receiving services, and the uncertainty that some people feel about being associated with a program devoted to ASD supports. One staff stated that even if someone needs assistance, the student may be reluctant to take advantage of the opportunity. A participant spoke about students admitting that they feel overwhelmed by their schedule and course load but refuse the supports that are there and available to them that would help with feeling overwhelmed. One contributor stated that this is difficult type of challenge when students are not utilizing the help.

Speaker 1: "Most not adequately seeking out academic supports, even if they're not doing well, right? We find out right before... This is about the time that we really find out students are failing and that we're supposed to do something about that, but it's hard to do that. So, yeah, those are hard parts, I think."

The same participant further elaborated later in the discussion:

Speaker 1: "There are other programs that you come and you sign a contract and you're in the program, and you do the things that the program has. [The Autism program at this university] is offered in more of a la carte, if you want it, you can have it, we're not going

to force it down your throat. But I see then more students that, especially as I started talking with other programs, I certainly see room where it's like, ooh, these students really could use X, Y, or Z that we offer and they're not, and they're failing or they're lonely, and they complain about not how having social. Or they're struggling socially just generally because of reports that we get, and they're not using some of these pieces that could be really helpful for them.”

Staff articulated the desire to collaborate and create more opportunities with university programs as well as non-university entities. Wheeler (2014) emphasized the important non-academic parts of college which impact the postsecondary experience, such as being an active part of the University culture and norms as well as establishing opportunities for potential employment prospects. It was noted that attempts have been made to create a contract for peer mentoring with the state’s disability rights services, but it is a process that is slow to implement. The professionals agreed that a volunteer peer mentoring program would be beneficial if a sufficient number of volunteers could be produced.

Speaker 1: “I think that a peer mentoring program to assist with the transition into higher education for our students with autism. Actually we can make an argument almost always that transition from semester to semester is always difficult, so it's pretty much always available to them.”

Funding, however, was noted as a limitation preventing the formation of such additional programs and supports, such as peer mentoring. One participant spoke to the problematic issue of the University Autism program being offered at no cost. It was discussed that one consequence of not charging a fee is budget limitations, which does not allow resources for initiating new programs or further expanding on current supports.

Speaker 1: “We have four graduate students that work under me for that and that's it, and so they all carry a caseload. We have 75 students that are currently enrolled in that program. But I would say that one of the things is that transition, like helping students see what higher education is asking and be prepared for that and understand some of the basics, especially coming out of high school and moving into that environment, knowing upfront this is what this is going to look like and here's what the expectation is.”

The conversation neared conclusion with participant discussions on how the University and the supports offered for ASD students compares to other colleges and universities. One participant stated that the University does well with ASD student service provision. The respondent compared the University with another institution where there were a great deal of students on the spectrum, but a lack in staff training. The staff expressed gratitude in the development opportunities provided by housing and disability services at this University which enhanced communication skills and overall awareness of strategies to implement with ASD residents. Specific examples were provided when participants collaborated with each other, and there was praise for the disability staff in meetings where ASD support strategies and suggestions were offered to educate housing staff. The staff stated that the resources provided to housing have been helpful in the pursuit of student success.

Speaker 4: “So for me, coming from an institution where I was not trained to talk about at all or even communicated to about students on the spectrum and coming here, I feel like I'm always talked to about [the university programs]. It helps me as a professional and I'm pretty sure it also helps the student too.”

A participant expressed the satisfaction in the University when comparing it to schools like this one that do not have a fee-for-service Autism program. It was stated that the University

compares very well, and that the University Autism program and staff have paved the way in motivating others within the organization to see the value in ASD service provision.

Speaker 2: I think the involvement of [the University IDD program] has I think helped some faculty members be more attuned to a range of accommodations that need to be made. So I think [this institution] compares favorably against schools that don't have a fee-for-service program. There are some programs though out there that have fee-for-service for autism support that are tremendous, but that's a cost barrier that probably gets in the way for the vast majority of students that attend [this University], because those programs tend to cost the neighborhood of \$2,500 to \$3,000 or more per semester.”

One professional referenced networking and connections with other postsecondary ASD programs. It was admitted that there are other programs in the nation doing exceptional work in the field and offering more supports, but it was noted that these programs are typically charging a fee for the service or have access to additional resources to fund the program. It was revealed that the clear challenge for this University is the lack of income generated for the program. Responses indicated a desire for enhancement and the recognition of needed improvement, but there was also a realization that resources are not plentiful.

Speaker 1: “There is sort of a clear line, at least that I've seen over the five years, this being my fifth year, I guess, where it's like, we really are sort of up against our max right now, what we're able to do, given the support system that we have around the program itself.”

The conversation came to a close with talks about the University and the efforts made for years by University affiliated programs that provide supports and opportunities to citizens in the community with developmental disabilities. It was noted that the University does well with

regards to the level of comprehensive services offered. The pre-K program for children with a range of disabilities was referenced, as well as the University Autism clinic which serves high school aged youth and young adults. The participants listed those programs in addition to the University Autism program comprised of degree seeking students, and the IDD program for non-degree seeking students with developmental disabilities.

Speaker 1: “[This university] goes all the way through the entire lifespan of somebody with a disability and can support in certain ways. So I think that from that respect, [this University] has a really strong support for people with disabilities, autism and others... there's always room for improvement and I certainly can see what some have done, and yeah, I think that fee-for-service piece is really where you're taking students, You're paying for this, you're going to show up to everything, you're going to go through this specific curriculum or pathway, and it kind of brings people out on the other side.”

## **Focus Group Two**

The second focus group discussion via Zoom was set for mid-November with six postsecondary professionals from a four-year, public, research university in the state of Mississippi. This group of participants consisted of the disability services director, a disability services staff, a faculty development employee, a representative from campus recreation, and two housing staff. Prior to the focus group discussion via Zoom, all six participants completed a brief Google doc questionnaire when they consented to participate in the study. Four of the six participants indicated that they had provided services, supports or classroom instruction to college students with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Three of those four participants confirmed that those students had been officially registered with the office of disability services at their institution. Two of those four participants confirmed that the students

they served seemed satisfied with the supports received from the University.

The participants were informed of the intent of the study before the focus group discussion began as the following statement was read out loud by the researcher: *I want to seek information regarding current supports and services offered by your university for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I hope that you all will be able to share your experiences and any strategies you utilize or have shown to be effective. I've reached out to you all to gain valuable insight. If students with Autism seek enhanced supports from colleges across the state, then I feel it is important that the voices of the professionals carrying out these supports be heard.*

The discussion was guided by three overarching questions:

1. How are postsecondary disability services staff and faculty in Mississippi motivated to serve students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
2. Based on their experiences, how do postsecondary disability service providers and faculty in Mississippi identify the most beneficial types of services and supports offered to college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
3. What are the approaches or resources which could allow for postsecondary disability services practitioners and faculty in Mississippi to enhance service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

**Table 2**

<i>Focus Group 2</i>
Participants
Disability Services Head Disability Services Staff Faculty Development Staff Campus Recreation Staff 2 Housing Staff
Anonymous Survey Prior to Focus Group Discussion:
4 of the six participants indicated that they had provided services, supports or classroom instruction to college students with a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).  3 of those four participants confirmed that those students had been officially registered with the office of disability services at their institution.  2 of those four participants confirmed that the students they served seemed satisfied with the supports received from the University.

The conversation began with discussions on how postsecondary disability services staff and faculty in Mississippi are motivated to serve students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A variety of experiences and approaches were revealed when each staff shared their own motivation for ASD service provision. Two participants spoke about having an interest in disability studies and expressed gratification with the increased staff and faculty acceptance and support of ASD students at the University. One participant offered insight for motivation as having a family member with Autism who is currently navigating the K-12 setting. Another respondent expressed encouragement by ASD student inclusion in traditional K-12 classrooms exposing peers and raising awareness and understanding of children on the spectrum. One staff reflected on a previous career as a special educator in secondary classrooms in the 1990's and early 2000's and mentioned how uncommon it was to see ASD students in the classroom. It was noted that increased educational opportunities at all levels has motivated the work being done in carrying out postsecondary disability services.

Participants spoke to the magnitude of increased Autism awareness in inspiring the work. Contributors discussed the misunderstandings and lack of knowledge staff and faculty had regarding Autism when this population of students first began to enroll at the University. Mindful discussions to educate faculty and staff on the characteristics of the diagnosis, combined with training and actual exposure to students with ASD, have led to improved interactions and supports. There was talk about these opportunities resulting in more skilled staff and faculty who provide enhanced ASD student supports.

Two participants spoke about inclusivity and systematic inequities in higher education. Both referred to being aware of such issues and having a desire to help students break through barriers created by structural and societal inequities. The participants noted the motivation to break barriers for all types of students and a drive for overall student success in college. It was noted that informing ASD students about the available accommodations would allow for the supports to seem more accessible and produce student achievement.

Most participants discussed the influence that the internet, social media and television has on their work. Increased knowledge and greater awareness on social media, television, and pop culture revealed how routine the topic of Autism has become for citizens. It was noted that people with ASD have become more visible via these outlets, and the people are better equipped to interact effectively with peers who are on the spectrum.

Speaker 4: “[Autism] is not as mysterious...the fear of not knowing...you see Autism and people on the spectrum being put out there more often than they were before.”

Speaker 3: “Access to the information itself has made it easier to understand and figure out what the next steps should be. Much more out there for people to read and understand. There are celebrities who come out and have conversations...bringing that

awareness to people and showing how their lives look.”

Speaker 2: “[One young family member] has never known a world without [the other family member] with autism. She talks about it with her friends and it’s more mainstream of a discussion. Just generationally, when I talk with children her age, they don't bat an eye when I say, so and so has Autism. I think generationally there's a lot of difference.”

The second part of the discussion was guided by experiences and how postsecondary disability service providers and faculty in Mississippi identify the most beneficial types of services and supports offered to college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Some of the customary accommodations recommended by professionals for ASD students were described by participants, such as classroom accommodations, extended time during test taking, and students requesting to take tests in a distraction free environment due to sensory issues. Disability services staff spoke about referrals often made to additional campus programs such as academic support services, the writing center, student success support services, and the counseling center.

One disability services participant spoke to the individualized nature of ASD student supports. It was pointed out that accommodations vary as the requests tend to be quite personalized. Another participant described the characteristics of Autism as being on such a wide spectrum making the accommodations diverse and individualized. It was noted that any need for a student should be individualized regardless of the diagnosis, and the nature of the requests are typically not difficult or unreasonable accommodations.

Speaker 2: “It is usually tweaking things...not super expensive.”

Participants spoke about providing ASD students assistance with planning and how such supports are helpful for this group of students. One respondent referred to students on the

spectrum as linear and literal. It was noted that a clearly defined plan allows the student to find a situation more manageable with straight forward guidelines. A plan describing potential issues and guidance was referenced as reducing the uncertainty of social situations and providing more appealing opportunities for students with ASD. Participants discussed students having less anxiety about joining in an activity for which they find themselves with others having common interest. There was dialogue about students developing romantic relationships with peers who have the same interests after disability services provided a plan and advice on identifying and linking with groups or clubs.

Designing supports for sensory issues was another type of accommodation identified by respondents as being beneficial for ASD students. The DSM-5 lists one characteristic of ASD as hyperactivity or hypoactivity to sensory input. One participant referenced experiences from working with a community event where people with developmental disabilities, including individuals Autism, attend a prom. The staff illustrated how many individuals on the spectrum at the event could potentially confront sensory issues from lighting, but the event coordinator made sure to provide sensory places in the event such issues occurred. Contributors noted that modifications to an environment can make a location more sensory friendly for people with ASD and other types of disorders.

Speaker 2: “Fluorescent lights that are in every institution known to man, those are a problem, they buzz and they flicker, and are issues for people that have seizure disorders too.”

Housing appeared to be a vital component in ASD service provision at the University. One disability professional referenced the crucial housing piece but expressed concern about the support being done without access to information which would be more helpful in effectively

meeting student needs. It was noted that when a student does disclose to the resident advisor or staff, there is an awareness that may explain challenges encountered and allow for better-informed resolutions. It was mentioned that students do not often disclose, however, causing limitations in the ways issues can be addressed. One housing participant spoke about working with disability services when a student has requested an accommodation and that the work is often done blindly as staff may not know the reason for the request. The staff included that a desired outcome of the accommodation is identified, but an explanation for the request is not specified. The housing staff recalled working closely with disability services, however, and mentioned strong ties and clear guidance for referring students to disability services when needed. The housing participants stated that although an official reason for accommodations from disability services is not provided, the housing professionals develop relationships with the residents often resulting in student disclosure. A sense of trust was described as being built on the part of the housing staff with the residential students who often reveal the reason behind a request made on their behalf.

Speaker 4: “[Disability services] provides how they get that information back to us so that we can provide the best support that we can for them while they're here. Our work [in Housing] is on the backend...[disability services] does the hard lifting. We simply provide the accommodation that [disability services] recommends.”

Frequent requests included the need for a private room to prevent interactions and having to take part in developing relationships with roommates. Participants spoke about the role of housing in providing an environment for ASD students to unwind after engaging all day in class with instructors and classmates. One housing contributor spoke about the significance of providing a safe and relaxing atmosphere for students with disabilities, and the importance

placed on such requests from disability services. The efforts were noted of the staff and resident advisors to encourage opportunities for ASD student participation and involvement in activities or events.

Speaker 4: “When we get an accommodation request from [disability services], we don't know why. If we're asked for a single room, we provide a single room. But we don't know why. Students who self-disclose may ask to come early and get pancakes before the crowd arrives and leave when people start showing up. Talking to students and making accommodations creates a stronger relationship between those students and our staff. Often the student will be there when we're still setting up and so they become a part of that group...feel more, I think, included in that side of it. We have a good experience with that, again, if students self-disclose and talk to us about it.”

The housing participants reiterated how they often provide supports without knowing the reason or the diagnosis of the student. One participant stated the student may be on the Autism spectrum or there may be another reason for a request. The housing staff often discover the reason, however, when the student has trouble dealing with an issue or if a student attempts to negotiate a solution. Students may encounter being bullied, being teased, and roommate conflicts. Such issues frequently result from a roommate interaction with what may seem like abnormal behavior.

Speaker 4: “Another student is coming in, expecting their roommate to be, and then they turn out to be different. Students and parents are researching their roommates before they ever even arrive, checking their social media to learn about roommate before they arrive. If they have a disability or quirk we might get a phone call saying, Oh, my daughter cannot live with so and so, because I saw this on their Instagram page.”

A discussion of the various supports offered to students with ASD at the University incited a conversation about concerns and issues regarding limitations. There was talk about ASD students often having the academic tools needed for college achievement, but a lack of correctly utilizing their skills and abilities to be successful. It was repeatedly noted that there are students who are on the spectrum who do not disclose their Autism diagnosis, even when they disclose other disabilities.

One respondent talked about faculty and the lack of information regarding a student when an accommodation is made. It was revealed that a faculty typically does not know the reason behind the request causing insecurity about their approach and productively meeting the needs of the student. Another participant expressed concern about the ambiguity regarding the issue and that the goal for the student is at times unclear. It was stated that such obscurity can be challenging for faculty who want the student to thrive. A disability staff described upheaval with faculty in the earlier years when ASD student enrollment began to appear. There was a lack of information and a great deal of hesitation described by the staff in supporting a student with ASD. Even greater apprehension was noted regarding behavioral concerns and boundary issues, but the University faculty have improved with the idea of accommodating requests. It was mentioned that many students do not take the steps necessary to alleviating some of the faculty doubt. Some participants spoke about the supports that are not utilized by students that could bridge communication with faculty and promote understanding.

Speaker 5: “Some students don’t take advantage of writing a letter to their faculty disclosing possible behaviors, issues, needs, etc. There are still challenges and instructors who don't want to go the extra mile of providing accommodations and providing additional support. We do still get pushback.”

The participants discussed the frequency of comorbidity observed in the students with ASD. One participant considered the confusion which exists regarding the diagnosis as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual guidelines have recently been updated and changed the categories of the spectrum. Uncertainty surrounding the diverse characteristics and broad range of the diagnosis were noted as leaving peers and staff bewildered as to the behavior which may exhibited by a student with ASD. One respondent believed the lack of student disclosure increases the number of incidents and behaviors reported to disciplinary bodies. It was discussed that the disciplinary staff are not permitted to have access to disability status or student diagnosis, and often having such information would be helpful in explaining a behavior. One staff shared a situation where a student was reported for concerning behavior. The actions of the student were considered strange or frightening, but peers misinterpreted the behavior and reported the conduct. The participant also recalled incidents where students were reported for threatening behavior, and the committee did not discover until later that the student was on the Autism spectrum which explained the reason for what was mistaken as unacceptable conduct.

Speaker 5: “There was the perception that the student might be dangerous...when he became frustrated, his stimming was to clench his fists and kind of rock back and forth. He was perceived as threatening and if you were sitting across from him and he is doing that, it seems like, okay, he's going to lose it and he is going to jump across the table at me. But it was his way of coping with frustration and the anxiety felt. If you don't understand why the behavior is happening he may be viewed as a threat to somebody else or to himself.”

One staff pointed out how the lack of student disclosure can be detrimental as peers who appear to be unaccepting or not inclusive may actually be misinterpreting the ASD student

behavior. There was conversation about ASD students and how sharing their diagnosis would allow peers with a possible explanation to potentially anticipated behavior. It was noted that raising awareness of the characteristics of ASD would provide peers with understanding and encourage ASD student acceptance.

Speaker 3: “If others understood the student had ASD, probably many of them would not have felt that way.”

There was concern expressed regarding the social and romantic isolation habitually felt by students with ASD. Social communication and interaction deficits are common characteristics found in ASD and may include social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communication, and challenges maintaining and understanding relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). One participant spoke of a situation where a student with ASD did not seem to understand the boundaries of dating. His behavior was viewed as threatening and obsessive, so the other student filed a complaint. A plan had to be developed for the student to follow with guidelines on what behavior may be interpreted as inappropriate. It was noted, however, that the ASD student still encountered challenges with the guidance as he had a very literal interpretation of the rules. The respondents agreed that characteristics of the diagnosis can prove to be challenging with the lack of understanding social rules and norms.

Speaker 5: “For instance, I can think of a student who liked a girl, she was in a couple of his classes because they were in the same major and he used to follow her. And she viewed that as threatening, so she filed a complaint. And we sat him down, his parents came in and we gave him some parameters, you cannot follow her. He was so literal that he wasn't following her anymore, but he would wait for her outside of her classrooms, just so that he could see her, just so that he could say hi. So he wasn't following her

around campus. He was just meeting her when she got out of class. And again, that was viewed as threatening, but he was so literal when we said don't follow her, he wasn't following her. And so he didn't understand that boundary. And so we had to have another couple of conversations.”

Other participants talked about the issues when ASD students transition from the K-12 setting to higher education. Pre-college supports and services for individuals with ASD were discussed and it was noted that more students are increasingly getting support in high school from guidance counselors and learning strategies teachers. A staff stated that students receiving services in secondary education have developed relationships with trusted educators and feel more confident in seeking guidance regarding college. One respondent described students with ASD as feeling lost and not having an awareness of which staff and faculty to trust, where to go, or how to ask questions about services. A disability services staff stated that there are times when an ASD student is familiar with the office of disability services, but the student may request an accommodation for which the University cannot deliver. It was echoed that the student may have transitioned from K-12 where they received a plethora of supports and accommodations by familiar dependable educators. It was noted that when the students transition to college, there may not be an established connection, and this leaves students confused and uncertain on the next steps to take.

Although the University does not have a program specifically designed for ASD students, various departments within the organization seem to be making strides and acting in a way which can benefit this population of students on campus. One participant reported a type of support which had been helpful with ASD students. Disability services practitioners who have the permission of an ASD student can assist with writing a letter to an instructor to disclose the

student diagnosis. It was emphasized that the staff provided the student with the control to determine what would be important information to share with the faculty, such as behaviors for which the instructor may observe in class. It was believed to be beneficial to the student by providing the opportunity to disclose in a letter rather than face to face which can be intimidating and anxiety producing for individuals with ASD. It was noted that the faculty seemed appreciative of the correspondence and were better prepared to understand and accept a behavior for which the student had prepared them.

Another participant shared about adaptations to campus recreational settings that benefit students with ASD from suggestions listed on student needs assessments, as well as recommendations made by students to recreation staff. It was also noted that there is an accessibility form on the University recreation website where requests can be submitted without being required to disclose a disability. The campus recreation participant talked about providing services and facilities that are more inclusive for students on the spectrum. It was discussed that environmental modifications have been made such as lower lighting in studios, adjusting the volume level or the type of music that is being played, offering fewer crowded spaces, and creating more private workout areas.

One respondent reported on the efforts being made to rethink hiring practices for student employees who have ASD. It was noted that there is more understanding about prospects which may be better suited for people on the spectrum, and the positions which may provide more opportunities for ASD student success. It was stated that although the disability services staff are charged with the task of accommodating ASD students, all faculty and staff feel a sense of providing supports and eliminating barriers for students who have been historically marginalized. It was noted that the faculty and staff value the efforts being made towards diversity, equity, and

inclusion for all students, including those on the spectrum.

A robust discussion on faculty development commenced with participants speaking about workshops on universal design and inclusive strategies which could benefit students of varied learning modalities. One respondent spoke about faculty training provided on identifying the types of pedagogical approaches which are beneficial to students with Autism. There have been development opportunities on universal design and enhancing common classroom practices. The participant shared about ways to enhance the effectiveness of small group work to be more beneficial for ASD students such as assigning roles in group work to minimize the level of uncertainty encountered with social interaction. It was agreed that providing faculty with such tips and strategies can benefit the students on the spectrum.

The final part of the focus group discussion was guided by a conversation on approaches or resources which could allow for postsecondary disability services practitioners and faculty in Mississippi to enhance service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The participants spoke to the culture of the University regarding Autism and students with ASD. Although it was noted that there is still hesitancy or resistance with accommodation requests, the atmosphere overall at the University is more accepting and the support of ASD students has increased.

Speaker 5: “The perception of students on the spectrum has improved over time...still challenges and instructors who don't want to go the extra mile of providing accommodations and providing additional support to any student who might be registered.”

One participant noted that most college students at the University appear to be more accepting now due to having access to information on Autism via the internet, social media,

television, awareness in schools, etc. It was revealed that there are still concerns with acceptance as having more knowledge on ASD does not necessarily mean that one is genuinely welcoming and inclusive of students on the spectrum. The respondent added that some people are understanding and accepting at a distance; but not in daily interactions or living in the same space.

Speaker 4: “There is a difference between saying, Oh, yes, I'm accepting of this person who lives over there, verses, This is in my room, around my stuff. And I can't bring my boyfriend in.”

Speaker 5: “In housing there is some bullying from other people living on the floor...other students...roommates being not very nice and not very accepting and people teasing them. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen.”

One participant talked about the perception of others, and that peers often misinterpret behavior of a student with ASD. It was discussed that raising awareness and providing more information about the characteristics of the diagnosis would be beneficial as peers would be more familiar with potential behavior or responses from students with ASD. It was noted that being unsure about what it means for a student to have a diagnosis of ASD leaves peers fearful and not knowing what to expect.

Speaker 3: “We're talking about how inclusive or how students and faculty respond, I think the more they know, the better.”

One participant spoke about the inclusive nature of campus recreation and unified sports. There were opportunities mentioned for students of all abilities to participate in activities, such as Special Olympics where an athlete is partnered with an Ole Miss student athlete for sports like flag football. Programs are offered to celebrate diversity, including those on the spectrum.

Autism Speaks was referenced as a student organization on campus driven by advocacy for students with ASD and other special needs. It was noted that the student body recently voted on a young man with Autism to win significant title which speaks to the accepting culture of the institution. The participant expressed satisfaction with the student body and noted that professionals at the college are taking action to provide ASD students with the same opportunities for postsecondary success as other students.

The need for more transition coaching or mentoring was discussed when considering desired enhancements for ASD student support at the University. Participants talked about ASD students feeling lost during the transition from K-12 to higher education. One respondent spoke about the need for the University to establish connections between ASD students and staff or faculty. This would create a mentor for the student to use as a resource for seeking advice, guidance, and support.

The housing participants initiated a conversation about the impact of COVID and recognizing the need for additional supports as a result of the pandemic. Staff discussed residential students finding themselves spending a great deal of time with roommates as students were taking classes in their rooms together for long periods via virtual learning. One respondent stated that the next building renovation or construction of a new building should include relaxation rooms or sensory spaces. It was agreed that these types of areas in the buildings could offer a sanctuary or a space for a student to unwind. The residential staff stated that such decompression spaces have been discussed among housing professionals as an important factor to consider for the future. It was also noted that low stimulus spaces in athletic venues and stadiums would be beneficial for people to utilize when experiencing sensory overload. Disability staff confirmed that there have been talks about sensory friendly experiences in

multiple areas around campus, such as academic buildings, the recreation center, and sporting events.

Speaker 4: “A place with different lighting, comfortable furniture, sensory stuff that helps you step away and get away from stresses and roommates being annoying and you're stressed out about this and this and this.”

One respondent admitted there was a need to do more programming on the faculty side. It was noted that COVID stalled some planning and discussions that were occurring before the pandemic. It was agreed that the time has come for the planning and discussions to become a priority and carried out. Gobbo & Shmulsky (2013) reported on faculty concerns about needing more information on teaching students with ASD. Participants felt it a priority to enhance supports for ASD students as well as any group of students who have been typically underserved. It was suggested that creating more resources for students with ASD aligns with the principles of many University faculty and staff who are seeking ways to increase access to education in an equitable way.

Speaker 2: “This is exactly why we do the work we do within diversity, equity and inclusion.”

The concerns regarding student disclosure arose again while discussing desired enhancements. The housing participants discussed the complications which may arise when a student does not disclose to their roommate or housing that they have an ASD diagnosis. It was noted that requests for a roommate change are often the result of a peer finding it difficult to cohabitate with a roommate on the spectrum. Residential staff shared experiences about having to navigate complicated issues when there are requests for a new roommate from students who seem to be unwilling to reside with someone on the spectrum. It was emphasized that such

requests are problematic as the provisions in the housing contract prohibit discriminatory practices. The housing staff may suspect there is an underlying cause of the behavior resulting in a complaint, but they do not have access to any info regarding a suspected diagnosis.

Speaker 4: “We don't let people choose roommates based off of discriminatory practices, so managing that versus also thinking, well, I don't want this student now to live with you either because you're mean.”

The discussion concluded with a conversation about resources. It was expressed that the University must further prioritize enhancing ASD student supports to secure the type of money required to follow through with improved service provision. Multiple participants spoke of other universities creating autism centers or dedicated programs designed for students on the spectrum to access additional and specialized support. It was stated that such programs would offer more than just classroom accommodations or private room requests in housing. It was agreed that this type of dedicated support would assist ASD students with navigating social interactions and academic challenges encountered in higher education.

Speaker 6: “I think the thread weaving all these responses together is resource. We need a lot more resources for this work. And that goes beyond budget, I'd love to see someone in developments soliciting donors specifically for disability related resources.”

Speaker 5: “Provide a space to decompress, get support...more social support than we provide in our office. I think it would be great if we had a program specifically for students that's staffed with knowledgeable people who can provide support in addition to the accommodations that we provide.”

Speaker 2: “I would love to see a program like the one at [another college in this state] for people with developmental disabilities. There are a lot of champions in this town that

want to see that happen as well. I personally know a lot of special ed teachers, coaches on campus, faculty members that absolutely back this idea, if that ever becomes something.”

## DATA SUMMARY

### **Data Comparisons for Guiding Question 1: How are postsecondary disability services staff and faculty in Mississippi motivated to serve students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?**

Common themes emerged when comparing the data from both focus groups including similar motivation for their work in ASD student service provision. The similarities between the groups were rooted in comparable experiences, viewpoints, and approaches guiding their work at each institution. There were participants from both groups with mental health backgrounds and those with exposure to individuals with disabilities at various times throughout their lives in personal and professional settings. The conversations involving such experiences echoed features of the Quality of Life (QOL) approach. Friedman (2018) emphasized the QOL approach as recognizing the right that every individual has to a quality life. Some people may need support to reach that level of quality, and those who assist with providing such support can create nurturing opportunities to obtain a quality life (Friedman, 2018). The participants from each group spoke in ways that reflect a desire to provide the ASD students not only with opportunities for academic success, but also enhanced quality of life.

Another common motivation for postsecondary ASD student service provision was the impact K-12 public education has in shaping their approaches to the work regarding ASD supports in higher education. Participants described the obligations in K-12 to adhere to law and legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Chan, 2016). Individualized Education Plans (IEP) are developed for early learners by the

schools stating the needed supports and providing guidance for services delivery (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). Both groups noted, however, the vast contrast between the K-12 setting and higher education where there is not clear direction on how to best serve students on the spectrum, and less guidance from the law or legislation in the postsecondary setting. This was discussed as influencing the work in postsecondary disability service provision as students and parents have the same expectations from earlier experiences where the school is obligated to provide the supports. In the college setting, however, greater responsibility is placed on the student to voluntarily disclose the diagnosis and request accommodations (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014).

Participants from each group spoke about excitement and encouragement in their work when seeing an increasing number of ASD student enrollment and an increase in supports and services offered throughout higher education. Cox and South (2017) reported graduation rates for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or another disability at 41%, compared with 59% of the average student population. The disability professionals in this study highlighted the important role of colleges in providing students with supportive environments to nurture academic and social skills. It was noted that success would not only come in the form of degree obtainment, but also in the areas of independent living and future employment. Such ideals align with Feinstein (2018) who asserted that individuals with Autism contributing to the workforce benefit from financial growth, social progress, and emotional gains. The respondents in both groups referred to being motivated by seeing more of these services being offered at colleges and hearing about ASD student success when such supports are utilized.

Both groups spoke about disability advocacy inspiring their work and made mention of seeking ways to address issues of equity and social justice for people with disabilities. The term “disability theory” was not actually verbalized, but participants from both groups described

viewpoints which resonated with this concept including action driven by the pursuit of social justice (Hall, 2019). There was contention among both groups as the respondents described feeling the need to advocate as these students may have experienced oppression in the past. Participants emphasized the likelihood of these individuals encountering stigma and discrimination, and how important ASD student interventions and supports are in addressing systemic challenges to degree obtainment and academic success in college.

The Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate (CPED) emphasizes the importance of ethics, equity, and social justice. The participant responses in this study demonstrated professional ideologies and practices carried out by a passion for eliminating inequitable educational barriers for a historically marginalized population. Thelin (2017) discussed educational accessibility for all citizens and emphasized the value placed by American colleges in meeting the needs of a diverse student body. Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) should be seen as a valued part of the diverse student body at an institution of higher learning, and the voices of this group of students should be heard. Responsibility is placed on the disability services professionals to advocate for the students, and at times be the voice of the student who may have felt discouraged in the past when speaking for themselves due to communication deficits, social anxiety, and experiences with encountering stigma and oppression.

Postsecondary disability practitioners look for ethical guidance in service provision by building from various laws and legislation including the Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD). Ethical accountability should be positioned not just on the office of disability services at a college, but rather on the entire establishment of higher

education regarding the commitment to educational quality. The needs for all students enrolled at the institution, including those with ASD, should be considered and valued. Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties with social communication, sensory impairments, and repetitive or stereotypical behaviors (Pasco, 2018). The characteristics of the diagnosis, such as hesitancy to speak to faculty and staff, or anxiety regarding communication with peers, result in challenges regarding voluntary student self-disclose. Accountability is placed entirely on the student to register with disability services and request accommodations (Newman & Madaus, 2014). Communication limitations and social skills issues become barriers to accessing postsecondary education for students on the spectrum when there is little institutional obligation to reach out to students regarding available ASD supports and services. An ethical dilemma could be argued as ASD students report withdrawing from college after dissatisfaction with the level of supports offered in higher education (Gurbuz et al., 2019).

The participants from both focus groups talked about experiences with ASD students regarding fairness, equality, and discrimination. Descriptions of interactions and relationships built in their work with college students on the spectrum revealed experiences by a group of students who have encountered marginalization. The responses from each group included the need for these students to be recognized by their peers and their universities. Advocacy for individuals whose voices have gone unheard contains a social justice component, and it was clear that the contributors in this study are driven by such a calling to address issues of societal injustice.

**Data Comparisons for Guiding Question 2: Based on their experiences, how do postsecondary disability service providers and faculty in Mississippi identify the most beneficial types of services and supports offered to college students with Autism Spectrum**

## **Disorder?**

Participants from both groups also referenced guiding principles in their work grounded in common practices from Autism programs at various colleges, professional associations, and licensure requirements. Universal design and classroom strategies were reported as examples of suggested supports from the field utilized by both groups. Such pedagogical approaches and practices have been featured throughout the literature as evidence-based teaching strategies for the classroom that benefit ASD students (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Studies on the important role of staff and faculty awareness is prevalent in the research on ASD student success, which is a likely explanation for the respondents stating their work is influenced by the need for increased awareness and training for staff and faculty (Chan, 2016; Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013; Hurewitz & Berger, 2008). Hurewitz and Berger (2008) reported that college staff and faculty are often unaware of effective support for students with ASD. The views of the participants showcase the need for increased faculty and staff training and development to increase awareness of the various strategies and supports beneficial for ASD students, and to boost confidence when carrying out service provision.

The types of services described by both groups aligned with common practices suggested by professional associations in the field, implemented at various colleges and universities, and recommended in the literature. Guzman (2009) noted that postsecondary disability services practitioners often utilize individual methods or approaches for ASD student service provision which proved to be beneficial from personal or professional experiences. Similar practices listed from responses at each institution included test taking modifications and student-faculty communication. These types of accommodations are frequently noted throughout the body of research to address communication skills, social skills, sensory differences, learning styles and

coping skills (Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013) and have proven to be useful in the past for students with Autism at their respective universities. Common strategies described by the participants in each focus group resemble those listed by Wheeler (2014) such as accommodations for communication issues and allowing students to complete tests in a private space. Both groups asserted that although common practices such as these are employed at their institutions, the approach taken with each student is individualized as what works for one student with Autism may not work for another. Wheeler (2014) highlighted the importance in recognizing that each person with a diagnosis of ASD is a unique individual with specific needs and there is no all-encompassing methodology to Autism service delivery. The participants indicated an awareness of the need for such customized approaches.

While discussing the types of services offered at each institution, limitations and challenges were expressed in service implementation and delivery. Approaches to ASD student support at each institution seemed to be a result of federal laws and legislation guiding the types of accommodations that should be made, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504). The importance placed on the legal rights of the students was echoed in the responses from both focus groups regarding the inability of staff to disclose student identity and their diagnosis to faculty and peers. Both groups talked extensively about the limitations on their work by the voluntary student self-disclosure requirements, yet each professional firmly adhered to this commitment.

Limitations and challenges regarding student disclosure resulted in each focus group voicing concerns regarding need for students and families to be better prepared at the secondary level for college the steps to securing accommodations in college. Contributors from both groups placed the need on the part of colleges to do more in providing transition services. It was stated

that postsecondary education should be collaborating and planning with high schools to provide transition counseling for students and families. Such guidance would inform students and families on the differences in the college setting and assist with establishing contact and connections with the ASD supports programs offered at an institution of higher learning.

Participants from each group discussed similar approaches in academic advising, including person-centered approaches in the guidance provided for ASD students. Professional responses in each group aligned with Duggan (2017) noting the importance of providing concrete guidelines and instructions for ASD students to reference. Respondents expressed the desire for students to disclose when first admitted to the university allowing for a plan to be developed early on which could supply a clear path for students to follow. Gobbo and Shmulsky (2013) described individuals with ASD as typically responding well to scheduling, preparation and specific instructions, and both focus groups described ASD students in such a manner throughout the discussions highlighting how there is often a need for structure and planning. It was in discussions regarding the need for structure and planning where participants from each group stated a benefit of having specialized Autism programs at colleges and universities is a dedication to providing schedule planning and academic advising in a customized and person-centered manner. Offering a specialized service design would reinforce the findings of studies where tailored supports and accommodations are seen as advantageous for ASD college success (Roberts & Birmingham, 2017; Hees et al., 2015).

Both focus groups revealed the value placed in collaboration among various departments throughout each university in providing comprehensive services for college students with ASD. One area where collaborative efforts seem widespread at both institutions are in housing. Housing participants from each focus group described strong ties with the respective offices of

disability services including an active presence in meetings and training opportunities which have proven to be helpful for the residential staff. The housing responses from each university also included a sense of advocacy for students on the spectrum. Residential participants discussed their growing interest in ASD student service provision as a result of their exposure to this student population and the interactions encountered by peers in housing settings. There were responses regarding the hesitance or apprehension from peers when living with an ASD student, and the staff feeling a sense of responsibility to advocate for those on the spectrum.

The work of Symeonidou (2009) came to mind when reflecting on the housing participant responses as there were descriptions of student experiences in residential settings which could be connected to socially structured oppression and marginalization. Symeonidou identified an intersectionality of disability and feminism considering the social justice component of both disability theory and feminism. It was hypothesized that this conceptual framework could be utilized in viewing the motivation behind the work of professionals in the field of disability services, particularly when staff feel the responsibility to advocate for students due to socially structured oppression or marginalization. The housing staff discussed seeking advice and guidance from disability services professionals to accommodate ASD students, but to also seek ways in which relationships can be built and interactions encouraged so that students on the spectrum may be feel more a part of the college community and connect with peers. The argument could be made that such steps taken by the housing staff lead to action and break barriers caused by socially structured oppression or marginalization.

**Data Comparisons for Guiding Question 3: What are the approaches or resources which could allow for postsecondary disability services practitioners and faculty in Mississippi to enhance service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?**

There were notable differences when comparing the data from both focus groups, although the variations do not seem to be the result of conflicting ideologies or principles. The disparities appear to be rooted in the extent to which each institution has prioritized investments for ASD student service provision. The first focus group discussion with participants from the institution with a specialized program designed by the University described more examples of social support and specialized accommodations. The concerns from this group were geared more towards the level of parental involvement and the need for enhanced transition supports from high school to college. There were fewer matters noted regarding the level of acceptance and interaction within the University community and culture. The concerns of the second focus group without a specialized Autism program, however, included more examples of misinterpretations of ASD student behavior, bullying, and other students not appearing inclusive or open to interactions with ASD students. The participants in the second focus group also described more pushback from faculty which was noted as possibly being attributed to a lack of understanding regarding the diagnosis.

There were noteworthy responses from each focus group regarding college culture at their respective universities and desired enhancements that could improve the work carried out at each institution. One college was depicted as having an accepting culture with university affiliated programs providing services across the lifespan for citizens with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The participants from the first focus group described an atmosphere with an overall awareness of disability service provision and the need for ASD students to have a place where they feel safe and supported. The second focus group depicted an environment where acceptance and understanding are increasingly present, but there is still a need for ASD student service provision to be greatly improved and higher prioritized. Various departments at

this University were noted as progressively doing more to accommodate students on the spectrum, and it was suggested that there is a growing presence of student organizations advocating for this population on campus. An individual with ASD was voted to a significant title in recent years revealing an expanding sense of acceptance and understanding by the student body. The participants from this college were highly encouraged by the heightened amount of acceptance and seemed proud of such advancements. Examples of student advocacy and efforts to promote awareness within the University were discussed, but so was the need for larger institutional and administrative involvement regarding the level of importance placed on ASD student service provision. The disability services participants from the second focus group expressed encouragement with the advancements made by the University over the years, and were hopeful that even more will be done at the institution to better serve students on the spectrum.

The respondents from the first focus group expressed a desire to do more with the specialized Autism program at the university but expressed concerns about the program having the capacity to do more with current funding and staffing. Offering the service free of charge allows the Autism program to be more accessible for students who may have financial constraints. Not charging for the service, however, is limiting in the amount of resources available for ASD student supports. The participants from the first focus group expressed a desire to see an increase in the level of ASD student involvement and accountability in utilizing supports, but the “no fee for service” status equates to few expectations being placed on the student to actually utilize the services offered. The culture of the institution was said to be one of heightened awareness of Autism, and it was stated by the practitioners that there was a desire to raise even more awareness with other students on ways to effectively communicate and relate

with ASD peers. The lack of resources was again noted as limiting the capability to adequately carry out such efforts due to staffing and funding. The participants from the first group contended that even with the desire to do more, they are aware that University compared well with other institutions with free Autism specialized services. The institution was depicted as placing a high interest in services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities ranging from early childhood into adulthood, including those with ASD.

The second focus group expressed the desire to have a specialized Autism program at their college. Participants in the second group believed more specialized and individualized supports could be offered if there was a program at the University specifically designed for and devoted to ASD student service provision. There were recurrent discussions by the respondents in this group regarding the need for additional resources and funding to enhance ASD student supports at this institution. It was noted that development needs to be involved and actively seeking ways to secure funding for an Autism program at the college. The desire expressed by the participants in the second focus group for an Autism program at their institution aligns with findings from Kuder and Accardo (2018) which revealed the need for more specialized and individualized non-academic supports in meeting the needs of college students with ASD. This wish was repeated throughout the discussion with these experienced and dedicated practitioners.

Responses from each focus group revealed a desire for upgraded interventions and supports at their respective colleges for students on the spectrum. The types of improvements expressed, however, indicated varying levels of priority placed on ASD student service implementation at each University. These findings strengthen the necessity to address the problem of practiced identified for this study regarding needed enhanced supports at colleges and universities to increase the likelihood of ASD student success and degree obtainment. The

professionals in the field of disability services and those who collaborate with them in delivering supports to students with Autism proved to be sources of insight and understanding. This study examines views of staff and faculty at select universities in Mississippi regarding strategies in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in postsecondary education.

### IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have often encountered educational barriers throughout their childhood and youth (Cory et al., 2010). The educational exclusivity experienced in the postsecondary setting have likely contributed to further marginalization for this population who already feel a lack of influence, power, and representation in society (Hall, 2019). Scholarly practitioners should feel compelled to advocate and act in a manner that promotes awareness and acceptance of students with diverse views and interpretations of the world (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). This study is driven by the effort to highlight the expertise and insight of those carrying out service provision for ASD college students, and it is noteworthy to include the significance each group placed in having a university program designed specifically for students with Autism. Higher education should consider the implication of participants from each institution repeatedly noting throughout the discussions a need for more resources and increased funding to improve the quality of supports offered to students with Autism.

The findings of this study are valuable when considering the ways in which service provision can be improved and the role that faculty and staff play in carrying out supports. There are limitations with the data, however, that should be discussed. Glesne (2016) highlighted a responsibility on the part of qualitative researchers to present inadequacies in the study that may be beyond the control of the investigator. One issue with the data in this study is the absence of

faculty participation. It is unfortunate that there were no faculty participants considering the responses in the study regarding reports of faculty needing more training to increase awareness of available supports and ways in which they can better serve students on the spectrum in the classroom. There were also examples provided in the study describing faculty hesitancy or pushback when a student has requested accommodations. It is useful that the responses in the study deriving from participants who are categorized as staff did speak in great detail about interactions, training opportunities and collaborative efforts with faculty at each institution. The staff contributions revealed various issues and challenges expressed by faculty as well as examples detailing the positive efforts made by faculty in attempts to help ASD students achieve success in the classroom.

Delimitations of the study are observed in the findings which reflect responses from two comparable public, four-year, research universities in Mississippi with participants identified as staff. There were no respondents characterized as faculty from either of the two universities. Practitioners and faculty from other colleges and universities throughout Mississippi would offer a more comprehensive report, but the contributions to this study reflected commonly utilized practices as identified in the literature on postsecondary Autism supports such as strategies designed to support communication issues, sensory differences, motor skills, varying learning styles and coping skills (Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). The challenges expressed in the responses and the recommendations made on ways to enhance postsecondary Autism service provision in this study additionally echoed concerns noted throughout research on ASD student supports (Gurbuz et al., 2019; Friedman, 2018; Cox & South, 2017). Professionals and educators from other Mississippi colleges may have similar responses as those representing these two institutions, but further inquiry would have to be done to obtain such findings.

One potential limitation to the study is the identification some of the participants and the researcher have as professionals in the field of disability services. It is possible that experts in the field may want to illustrate their respective programs and the work they do as exemplary. It would be feasible to consider the intention of the participants to give responses which were complimentary of their institutions and depicting their program service provision in a positive manner.

Another likely limitation is the nature of the questions offered by the researcher as being more general concerning faculty service provision. More in-depth questions regarding classroom strategies and pedagogical approaches would have likely produced responses where staff were limited in being able to provide a description of faculty experiences and recommendations.

It would have been more comprehensive to include discussion regarding adults with ASD who seek to enter institutions of higher learning without support from parents or other family members. Specific questions regarding the college outreach efforts to various organizations and service providers for adults with Autism would have allowed for insight on the level of awareness in the community and the extent of the endeavors being carried out for potential students who do not directly transition from high school to college.

The data generated in this study consisted of focus group discussion responses from two public, four-year research universities in Mississippi. The first part of the discussion with each focus group was devoted to providing experiences and guiding principles motivating the work of the participants in ASD student supports. The second portion of the discussion with each focus group detailed the types of requests and accommodations often encountered in service provision for college students with Autism at each institution. The final component of the conversation with each focus group was a discussion on desired enhancements for ASD student service

provision at their universities and higher education. The focus group responses adequately answer the three overarching questions utilized in the study to address the problem of practice:

1. How are postsecondary disability services staff and faculty in Mississippi motivated to serve students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
2. Based on their experiences, how do postsecondary disability service providers and faculty in Mississippi identify the most beneficial types of services and supports offered to college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
3. What are the approaches or resources which could allow for postsecondary disability services practitioners and faculty in Mississippi to enhance service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

The responses from these subject matter experts in both focus group discussions revealed the desire for improved ASD student services provision emphasizing the need for increased resources to fund adequate supports. Colleges and universities should take note of the suggestions provided by these dedicated professionals and answer a call to action by considering the amount of priority and importance placed on the ASD student population. As Caldora contended, the levels of support provided by an institution may reflect the priority placed on ASD student services (Stairway to STEM). Enhanced supports and services can be effectively provided for ASD students when the culture of a university is one which places value on promoting awareness and educating faculty, staff and students on Autism Spectrum Disorder. Gobbo and Shmulsky (2013) noted an increase in ASD student enrollment, and institutions of higher learning within the state should consider further investing in postsecondary Autism programs as more students on the spectrum matriculate to their campuses.

Providing students with specialized supports could result in increased ASD graduation

rates creating more pathways for citizens on the spectrum to the workforce. Degree obtainment, increased skillset and improved social skills could empower this historically marginalized population allowing them to be seen as valued and contributing members of society. Building from Labaree (1997), ASD college student service provision could be considered a public good benefiting the community as well as the United States labor force. As universities strive to further develop outreach programs, inclusion and diversity efforts, and cross-cultural engagement, students with Autism Spectrum Disorder should not be excluded in those endeavors. Directors and administrators in these areas should review program policy and identify where students with ASD fit in to the efforts being made for equity and social justice. Students on the spectrum have experienced exclusion and challenges due to the characteristics of their diagnosis and the disability for which they identify (Cory et al., 2010). Educational leaders and scholarly practitioners should seek ways to incorporate ASD supports into policy and practice in the context of postsecondary education to break down barriers and empower this group of students.

## MANUSCRIPT THREE

### **Problem of Practice**

Cox and South (2017) noted that one to two percent of the American college student population consists of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Heightened awareness and enhanced special education practices have partly contributed to an increase in ASD college student enrollment, and institutions of higher learning should be prepared to accommodate the needs of this expanding postsecondary population (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). The transition from high school to college presents a vast contrast in institutional accountability and student responsibility resulting in unanticipated challenges for colleges students on the spectrum. Chan (2016) asserted that public K-12 schools are required by law to provide adequate supports and services to students with a diagnosis by developing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is generated by the families, student, teachers, and other specialists and provides guidance for educators to follow in implementing supports. Goals, desired outcomes, and assessments on progress are built into the IEP offering comprehensive services and encouraging academic achievement (Chan, 2016). Students on the spectrum and their families approach college with expectations of continued service provision, but soon realize the steps necessary to secure supports are exceptionally different in this new educational setting (Chan, 2016; Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). Less accountability is placed on the postsecondary institution and more responsibility is required of the student to report the disability and request accommodations (Siew et al., 2017).

Graduation rates for ASD college students remain low at 41%, raising concern by various stakeholders regarding the available postsecondary supports and services for students on the spectrum (Cox & South, 2017). Fears regarding future employment, quality of life, and independent living resonate in students and their families as it is reported that ASD students are almost twenty percent less likely than peers to earn a degree (White et al., 2016). Feinstein (2018) highlighted the apprehension faced by this group of citizens with ASD who are seeking ways to actively be a part of the workforce, their local communities, and society. Placing value on the needs of the ASD college student population would benefit higher education in the United States as well as the entire nation by educating and developing the skillset of contributing members of the American labor force.

A review of the literature noted common strategies for service provision in postsecondary education for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to address communication deficits, issues with social skills, sensory differences, motor skills, learning styles and coping inabilities (Wheeler, 2014). One common practice provided by disability service professionals is to inform faculty about various evidence-based classroom strategies and pedagogical approaches which benefit students on the spectrum (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Academic advising and person-centered approaches are also frequently utilized by practitioners in supporting college students with ASD (Wheeler, 2014). Professionals continually strive to increase awareness and deliver developmental opportunities for faculty and staff on the characteristics of the diagnosis and ways to better interact with students on the spectrum with the hope of providing a more supportive environment for students with Autism (Duggan, 2017; Hees et al., 2015; Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013).

The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition

(DSM-5) provides standardized criteria for diagnosing an individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) which include deficits in social communication and interaction with severity based on impairments, and restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior. Deficits may include social-emotional reciprocity, nonverbal communication, challenges with maintaining and understanding relationships, stereotypical or repetitive motor movements, insistence on sameness, fixated interests, and hyperactivity/hypoactivity to sensory input (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). There is a wide range of functioning, however, associated with ASD resulting in a need for diverse and individualized college supports and accommodations (Wheeler, 2014).

Postsecondary disability service provision for students on the spectrum can be challenging as these characteristics of the diagnosis make it difficult for individuals to have the confidence, or even at times the ability, to communicate and make connections with the available supports. The varying functioning ranges means there is no all-encompassing approach to service delivery and to further complicate the matter, there are few guidelines offered by law or legislation in the college setting (Duggan, 2017; Chan, 2016; Hees et al., 2015). Adequate ASD service provision would entail staff and faculty devoting a significant amount of time, energy, and resources to offer specialized and tailored supports, planning, and advising for students on the spectrum (Hees et al., 2015; Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013).

Further complicating ASD college student disability service provision is the responsibility placed on the student to self-disclose. Self-disclosure is completely voluntary which presents a challenge for individuals who struggle with communication and social anxiety. Many students who had an IEP and received services or accommodations in the K-12 setting do not self-report when admitted to college due to various reasons such as communication uncertainty, social anxiety, fear of stigma attached to receiving accommodations, feelings of

newfound independence, or confidence in taking the next academic step without supports (Newman & Madaus, 2014; Martin, 2010). Sparks (2020) noted the rates of disclosure decreasing as individuals transition from high school to institutions of higher learning resulting in students unintentionally going underserved. Students who do not register with the office of disability services do not have access to the supports and accommodations which may be needed to achieve success in college (Hees et al., 2015).

Students who do self-disclose are often unsatisfied with the availability of services and levels of support offered from colleges (Sparks, 2020). A lack of resources is likely to blame for inadequate service provision indicating a larger systemic issue in higher education: the marginalization of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Critical disability theory asserts that social norms have defined impairments and stigmatization of certain populations resulting in experiences of exclusion and barriers due to the characteristics of their identity (Hall, 2019; Cory et al., 2010). Individuals who fall into the category of having a disability are labeled in a way that equates disability with vulnerability, resulting in the individual feeling a sense of lost power (Hall, 2019). Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder have likely encountered marginalization and stigmatization throughout their lifespan, including challenges with accessing quality education (Cory et al., 2010). American higher education is presented with the opportunity to offer supports which break down barriers to academic success with an emancipatory purpose that could eliminate societal constructions creating oppression for those branded as having a disability (Hall, 2019; Cory et al., 2010). Such an endeavor would contribute to the ongoing efforts in higher education towards equity and social justice for minority students, which should include those with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Theelin (2017) discussed the establishment of accessibility in American higher education

allowing for college attainment for citizens from diverse backgrounds. Individuals with Autism should be included in the endeavor to increase the accessibility of postsecondary educational opportunities for all, and institutions of higher learning should evaluate the level of value placed on students with ASD and the availability of supports offered to this group in the postsecondary setting. Colleges should invest in providing administrators, faculty, staff, and students with information that increases awareness and offers guidance to better interact with students on the spectrum. Heightened knowledge and exposure to students with ASD could result in increased acceptance, understanding, and value for this group of citizens.

Glennon (2001) noted frequent ASD student dissatisfaction due to poor academic performance and lower retention rates which could be attributed to non-academic challenges, such as social issues and communication deficits. Considering the increase in ASD student enrollment, it is necessary for colleges to improve the academic as well as non-academic supports offered for this population (Sanford et al., 2011). Supports could include preparing students with Autism on ways to handle potential social encounters, possible roommate issues, class or group participation challenges, or ways to communicate with faculty regarding assignments (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Common strategies such as these are utilized by disability services staff and there is a need for other university personnel to be aware of these options. The views of disability services practitioners are a valuable resource when attempting to contribute educate others on service provision and potentially improving ASD student supports.

Professionals in the field of postsecondary disability services strive to provide adequate supports to students with ASD despite the aforementioned challenges. These practitioners may be guided in their work by various principles such as Labaree (1997) using a democratic equality viewpoint of disability services as a public good. There is a multi-disciplinary nature to disability

theory, and practitioners who are driven by advocating for the rights of students to have a voice in their own educational journey could view their work through various disability theory lenses (Cory et al., 2010). Evidence-based practices, law and legislation, person-centered planning, Quality of Life approaches, and experiences in the field are additional factors likely motivating the work of staff in disability services (Friedman, 2018; Corrigan, 2014; Guzman, 2009).

The disability services professionals and those with whom they collaborate in carrying out provisions are a vital source of expertise and insight regarding supports for students with ASD. This group of practitioners also holds a wealth of knowledge regarding the students for whom they serve. Research on the experiences of college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder is growing, but the nature of the data available regarding the views of the practitioners in the field does not seem to be widespread (Kuder & Accardo, 2018; Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). The findings from the few studies which focus on the views of professionals not only offer a plethora of services and supports deemed beneficial for ASD, but also revealed the need for enhanced advocacy, further collaboration to close gaps between the transition from secondary to postsecondary education, and more specialized supports such as social skills support, schedule planning, communication with faculty, and academic advising (Witcher, 2020; Paskins, 2018). Continued research on the views of disability services professionals regarding ASD students service provision could result in enhanced supports and academic success for this historically marginalized group of students. Supplying the disability services professionals with the opportunity to discuss the needs of their institutions and ways to improve supports. Recommendations could be instrumental in promoting awareness at their universities and urging college administrators to place higher value and priority in ASD student supports. The study presented was intentionally designed to not only showcase the expertise and recommendations of

these professionals, but to also provide higher education with data showing ways in which ASD student supports could be enhanced.

### **Description of Data**

This study examines views of staff and faculty at select universities in Mississippi regarding strategies in supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in postsecondary education. An analysis is presented of the various accommodations offered for students with Autism at two comparable Mississippi colleges. Challenges encountered in ASD student service provision and the desired enhancements which could benefit their respective institutions are also included in the presentation of the data. This inquiry is situated in the context of qualitative methodology utilizing open-ended, semi-structured interviews in two focus group formats via Zoom. Three guiding questions were utilized in the focus group discussions to address the problem of practice while also allowing the opportunity for unanticipated responses to occur and be further employed in the conversation as needed:

1. How are postsecondary disability services staff and faculty in Mississippi motivated to serve students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
2. Based on their experiences, how do postsecondary disability service providers and faculty in Mississippi identify the most beneficial types of services and supports offered to college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?
3. What are the approaches or resources which could allow for postsecondary disability services practitioners and faculty in Mississippi to enhance service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Disability service professionals in higher education are a vital part of ASD student success, but these experts in the field cannot be expected to accomplish this task alone. The role

of the faculty, staff, and the administration are crucial in enhancing ASD student supports and making this area of service an institutional priority. Pedagogical approaches of supportive faculty can foster success in the classroom indicating the need for collaboration with instructors and increasing training opportunities regarding potential strategies and supports which could be implemented with students on the spectrum (Austin, 2014). Support from the college administration is integral in obtaining staff and instructor buy-in which could create a culture of support and acceptance for students with ASD. The college leadership could set the tone of ASD student acknowledgment and seeking ways to provide access to resources which can fund improved supports (Stairway to STEM).

An ideal study on the views of disability service staff and faculty would include representatives from both staff and faculty who are deemed experts in the field, and potentially having the ability to influence the administration at their respective institutions regarding the need for improved supports. The decision for this researcher to seek guidance from the disability services heads of each institution was intentional in an attempt to obtain suggestions for ideal faculty and staff participants and to also secure buy-in for the study from these prominent professionals. An e-mail was sent to each of the directors of disability services of the two comparable universities in the state, and each responded with participant suggestions as well as interest in themselves participating in the study. Both disability services directors recommended in their e-mails that staff from housing be invited to participate in the research as requests for residential accommodations are often made by students with ASD. One institution has an Autism degree-seeking student program, so the program coordinator was recommended by the disability services head of that college. Both directors forwarded the e-mail to their respective department staff encouraging participation in the study if interested.

The recommendations from each institutional director of disability services were noted and the e-mail addresses for the potential participants were secured from each of the university employee directories available on-line. E-mails were also sent to various professionals for whom the researcher thought to likely have encountered requests or experiences with ASD accommodations, such as campus recreation staff and faculty development professionals. Instructors who potentially hold knowledge of or experience with supports and services for students with ASD were also e-mailed an invitation to participate in the study, such as faculty from Psychology Departments and Education Departments at each university.

E-mails to prospective participants were sent in October 2021 to numerous staff and faculty at each institution with an invitation to participate in a study on supports and services for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The e-mail included an information sheet regarding the research details for the participant to reference, a Google doc link in the body of the message to complete a brief questionnaire, and an attached consent form to partake in a one-hour focus group in the Fall 2021 semester via Zoom with colleagues from their institution. The consent form also contained a request for involvement in on-going discussion following the focus group if needed. A statement was included in the body of the message emphasizing how valuable the insight, experience and expertise of the potential participants would be in contributing to this study. Interested staff from each university returned the completed consent form confirming participation in the study and finishing the brief anonymous questionnaire. There was unfortunately zero faculty interest in contributing to the study, therefore all involved were categorized as staff.

E-mail correspondence with participants throughout the month of October 2021 continued to discuss suitable dates and times regarding focus group discussions. A Doodle poll

was e-mailed later in the month containing specific dates and times for individuals to indicate availability to partake in a one-hour focus group discussion via Zoom. The contributors completed the Doodle poll, and a date and time for each institution was selected to accommodate participant schedules. Five participants from one institution confirmed participation in the first focus group discussion via Zoom scheduled for early November. Six participants from the second institution confirmed participation in the focus group discussion via Zoom scheduled for mid-November. A Zoom meeting was generated for each group, and a link to participate in the assigned focus group discussion was e-mailed to all participants. Reminder e-mails were sent to the participants the day prior to each of the assigned Zoom focus group discussions.

### **Summary of Findings**

The participant line-up for each group was satisfactory in the contributions made to the research. There was ample representation in each group from disability service professionals who provide supports for students with ASD on a regular basis. A significant housing presence was observed in the data from each focus group which was appropriate considering the frequency with accommodating requests for students with ASD in the residential settings. The second focus group included a campus recreation staff and a faculty development representative further enriching the data by providing additional disciplines which contribute to the overall service provision offered to students with ASD.

There was an absence of faculty participation in the study, but the staff responses included a robust description of the efforts, challenges, and concerns expressed by faculty over the years in supporting students with Autism. Representation of the teaching staff manifested in the discussions resulting in the presence of faculty voice via the respondents who have worked in collaboration with faculty in ASD student service provision. It is worth mentioning that the

institutions represented in the data are two comparable universities in the state. Future research should include additional Mississippi colleges to solidify a comprehensive presentation of the types of accommodations offered in colleges throughout the state. The recommendations for enhancement could also be similar to those provided in this study further legitimizing the need for higher education to improve ASD student supports.

**Summary of Findings for Guiding Question 1: How are postsecondary disability services staff and faculty in Mississippi motivated to serve students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?**

The findings of this study included a description from each focus group regarding the motivation and guiding principles encouraging their work in ASD student service provision. The similarities between the groups seem to be rooted in comparable experiences, viewpoints, and methods. Common themes expressed among the groups which guide the work in supporting students on the spectrum included mental health backgrounds; personal or professional exposure to individuals with disabilities; recognizing individual rights to a quality life; and the impact K-12 public education had in shaping their methods in higher education through laws and legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Chan, 2016).

Participants from each group also spoke about excitement and encouragement in their work by seeing an increase in the number of ASD student enrollment and growth in the various types of supports being offered in higher education. These areas of development were inspirational to participants in each group, but it was noted that more needs to be done to provide better services for students on the spectrum. The disability professionals highlighted the

importance of colleges providing students with supportive environments to develop academic success, social growth, independent living, and potential employment. Both groups spoke about disability advocacy influencing their work emphasizing the need for enhanced ASD student interventions and supports to increase degree obtainment and academic success for a group of students who have frequently encountered barriers to equity and social justice.

Guiding principles described in the work of participants from each group were grounded in common practices from other college Autism programs, professional associations, and licensure requirements. Pedagogical approaches and practices, including Universal Design and evidence-based classroom strategies, were mentioned as common faculty development opportunities provided at both universities. Hurewitz and Berger (2008) noted a need for college staff and faculty to become more educated on the characteristics of the diagnosis and informed on the types of supports which could benefit students on the spectrum. The participants reinforced this idea as there was discussion regarding their work as being guided by the necessity for increased awareness and training for staff and faculty.

Both focus groups spoke in detail about the collaborative efforts between disability services and housing. Participants from each focus group described regular communication and meetings among the two disciplines along with training opportunities for residential staff. The housing representatives shared a sense of advocacy for students on the spectrum resulting from continued exposure and interactions with this student population in residential settings. The relationship between the two departments appeared to be significant and a critical part of the overall service provision offered to students with Autism.

**Summary of Findings for Guiding Question 2: Based on their experiences, how do postsecondary disability service providers and faculty in Mississippi identify the most**

## **beneficial types of services and supports offered to college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?**

The data highlighted the types of services described by each group revealing similar practices at each institution, such as test taking modifications and student-faculty communication. Supports and accommodations such as those depicted by the participants are frequently noted throughout the literature to address communication deficits, social issues, sensory differences, learning styles and coping skills (Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Respondents from each group asserted that an individualized person-centered approach is taken with ASD student supports and academic advising. There was an appreciation noted for evidence-based practices and common accommodations made for students with ASD, yet these practitioners recognized the unique individualistic nature of supporting individuals on the spectrum who have a wide range of functioning and variations of the characteristics (Wheeler, 2014). Various supports and accommodations listed by the respondents adhere to federal laws and legislation, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504). The legal rights of the students were noted in the responses from each group discussion particularly regarding the inability of disability staff to disclose to faculty and peers when a student has a diagnosis.

Limitations and challenges in ASD service provision manifested in the responses from each focus group. Participants discussed concerns regarding student hesitancy in disclosing a diagnosis and expressed the desire for students to register with the office of disability services when first admitted to the universities. It was noted by participants from each group that early registration would provide the staff with the opportunity to better plan for anticipated issues which may arise throughout the semester. Both focus group discussions revealed a commitment,

however, to uphold the disclosure requirements despite the limitations often presented by not being able to share with faculty and staff when interacting with students who have an ASD diagnosis. Staff asserted that it would certainly benefit the student to disclose to faculty and staff, but it is up to the student to determine to whom, when, and if they choose to disclose.

Another limitation noted by each group while discussing the types of supports offered for ASD students at their institutions was rooted in a lack of resources. Participants from each group recognized the benefit of Autism programs at colleges and universities as efforts could be more focused on specialized supports for this group of students. Participants from the university without an Autism program expressed concerns about not being able to devote as much time and energy into providing sufficient schedule planning and academic advising tailored for ASD students (Roberts & Birmingham, 2017; Hees et al., 2015). There was a desire by these respondents for their institution to invest resources and funding into an Autism program. Interestingly, the participants from the university with the Autism program also noted limitations with the extent to which services can be offered to students with ASD. It was acknowledged that the staff have currently met the extent to which they can provide services and wished for additional resources to do even more to better serve the students on the spectrum.

**Summary of Findings for Guiding Question 3: What are the approaches or resources which could allow for postsecondary disability services practitioners and faculty in Mississippi to enhance service provision for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder?**

Desired enhancements were presented by participants in each group discussion with both groups expressing the need for their institutions to provide more transition services for high school students with ASD. Informing students and families before they matriculate to postsecondary education on the process to acquire ASD supports was identified as an area for

which all of higher education needs to improve and expand. It was noted that collaboration with secondary schools would be essential in sufficiently offering this service to provide guidance on the steps required by the student and the availability of ASD supports in postsecondary education.

The most significant responses from each group regarding desired enhancements were those concerning limitations due to insufficient resources. Respondents from both universities recognized a need for improved ASD student supports at their respective institutions, and it was asserted that such advancements could be made with increased access to funding and manpower. The types of improvement that were described by the participants from both groups, however, suggested differing institutional cultures regarding Autism awareness and varying levels of priority placed on ASD student service implementation at each college.

Participants from the first group expressed a desire to do more with the specialized Autism program which was described as already reaching the boundaries of the work that can be done with the limited resources and staff. Students are not charged a fee for utilizing this Autism program so there are constraints on the amount of specialized services provided as well as the amount of accountability or requirements placed on the student in utilizing available supports. The staff stated that the university compared well with other institutions with free Autism specialized services, but there is a desire to do even more to better serve the ASD students. It was noted that there is satisfaction with the level of provision offered students on the spectrum, but additional resources would allow for greater supports. Overall, the contributors described the institution as placing a high interest in services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities not just at the postsecondary level, but also with university affiliated programs that provide services for citizens ranging from early childhood into adulthood.

The second focus group expressed the need for a specialized Autism program at the university. Participants believed more specialized and individualized supports could be carried out if there was a program specifically tailored to the needs of ASD students. Additional resources and funding were identified by the staff as necessities in enhancing ASD student services at this institution. Development efforts were acknowledged as an area for which the institution could utilize to seek funding for an Autism program.

It was in the data comparison from each focus group regarding desired enhancements that the differences became evident concerning institutional awareness, acceptance, and investment in ASD service provision. The focus group discussion from the institution with an Autism program spoke of wanting to offer more social supports and specialized accommodations on top of what is already provided. The respondents from the first group described a college culture entailing acceptance and positive interaction within the university community for students on the spectrum. The concerns of the second focus group included examples of misinterpretations of ASD student behavior, some mention of bullying, and situations presented where other students did not appear to be inclusive or open to interactions with ASD students. The participants in the second focus group also described more pushback from faculty which was noted as possibly being attributed to a lack of understanding regarding the diagnosis.

The findings of this study confirm the necessity to address the problem of practice regarding a need for enhanced supports and services in colleges and universities to increase the likelihood of ASD student success and degree obtainment. The professionals in the field of postsecondary disability services sufficiently provided insight and understanding regarding students with ASD and the supports needed for their success in higher education. These dedicated and experienced practitioners noted barriers and challenges in ASD student service

provision which can be linked to issues of equity and educational exclusivity encountered by groups of students with disabilities, such as those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Administrators, faculty, and staff in American higher education should evaluate the extent to which the disabled student population is valued at their colleges, and students with Autism Spectrum Disorder need to be included in this consideration. Students on the spectrum have likely experienced stigma and marginalization throughout their lives and had to advocate for the accommodations and supports needed to access a quality education. From the moment an infant does not meet a developmental milestone, the journey begins for families who may spend a great deal of their lives advocating and seeking services for their loved ones (Cai & Richdale, 2016). The educational experiences of many students on the spectrum are met with barriers, challenges, stigmatization, and even at times unwilling or unaccepting educators who are resistant in making accommodations (Chan, 2016; Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014).

Public schools in the K-12 setting are required by law to accommodate and develop a plan for service provision addressing the needs for student success (Wheeler, 2014). Institutions of higher learning are not mandated by these same standards, but efforts should be made by colleges to better serve this group of students (Chan, 2016). Grogan (2015) reported that supports for students in the areas of transition, academics, and social skills can be complicated, and disability service providers often encounter limitations and challenges with resources. It is shown in the findings of this study that not only are specialized Autism programs needed at colleges and universities to overcome the challenges of ASD student service provision, but also that adequate funding is required for the program to satisfactorily utilize services.

### **Improving Practice to Enhance Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice**

The Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate (CPED) emphasizes the importance

of ethics, equity, and social justice in scholarly quests. The participant responses in this study demonstrated professional ideologies and practices driven in part by a desire for eliminating educational barriers for a historically marginalized population, and it is now time for administrators and various stakeholders to take note of these recommendations. The suggestions offered by dedicated and experienced practitioners should be received as a call to action in the pursuit of ethics, equity, and social justice.

Ethical accountability should be placed on the entire establishment of higher education concerning educational quality for all students, including those with ASD. Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by complications with social communication, sensory impairments, and repetitive or stereotypical behaviors (Pasco, 2018). The attributes of the diagnosis can result in individuals being hesitant to reach out to others, and even at times causing social anxiety when having to communicate with people (Wheeler, 2014). These characteristics often create challenges in accessing ASD supports in the postsecondary setting as students are required to self-disclose their diagnosis and request accommodations (Newman & Madaus, 2014). Students go underserved as a result of communication and social issues producing another hurdle in accessing a quality postsecondary education for this group of students. Colleges and universities should consider a response to this dilemma as an ethical obligation to address by promoting awareness and acceptance on college campuses and investing in specialized Autism programming.

Federal law provides some guidance in shaping current policy in higher education regarding ASD student service provision, but institutions of higher learning are not as heavily regulated by decrees and legislation which provide clear guidance regarding the expectations and adherence of services like those provided in the K-12 setting (West, 2019). College can certainly

be a challenging time for any student who is faced with the responsibilities associated with being away from home for the first time or without parental supervision and guidance. These challenges are magnified in students with communication deficits and social anxiety, such as individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Wheeler, 2014). Considering these challenges and a lack of guidance shaping postsecondary policy regarding ASD student service provision it is not surprising to find reports of college students with ASD having lower graduation rates and being unsatisfied with the supports provided at colleges and universities (Sparks, 2020; Ferrette, 2018).

Kaplin et al. (2020) noted that a current issue concerning student relationships is peer harassment which could be a result of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and disability. The responses in this study regarding bullying and feelings of exclusivity are concerning, but it is certainly likely that individuals with ASD have encountered such experiences throughout their lives. American higher education should be cognizant of these issues concerning potential harassment and take the steps necessary to show efforts being made to prevent such types of behavior from occurring at colleges and universities. Increasing awareness of Autism and providing adequate ASD student supports are ways that college administrators can show a good faith effort is being made to provide a safe and accepting environment for students on the spectrum.

West (2019) reported that the first Autism program designed for college students in the United States began in 2002 at Marshall University in West Virginia. There has since been an increase in Autism programs offered in American higher education with at least sixty programs identified in the nation (West, 2019). The recent growth in programs is partly due to heightened awareness about the growing Autism college student population which can partly be attributed to improved education supports offered through early intervention and K-12 accommodations

(Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). As presented in the findings of this study and others, colleges and universities with Autism programs have recognized the need for specialized supports which cannot typically be provided solely through the office of disability services (West, 2019; Cox & South, 2017).

The need for specialized Autism programs in colleges and universities is vital for ASD student success, but these programs necessitate funding and resources. Institutions that have dedicated programs for students on the spectrum can typically only accommodate a limited number of students, and often there are fees required for students to enroll in the program. West (2019) reported that such services can be expensive, costing as much as \$7,000 per semester over and above tuition. Other colleges that offer participation in an Autism program at no cost to the student have to seek funding from other sources, such as grants or donations. Without generating income for the program, practitioners are limited in the amount of time, energy and manpower that can realistically be devoted to supporting students with ASD. Disability services practitioners and advocates for students with ASD should lead the way in encouraging administrators to seek ways to generate or secure resources for postsecondary Autism support programs to be created or expanded.

The ostracism experienced at times by this group of historically marginalized students should be acknowledged, and advocacy for individuals who have been oppressed contains a social justice component (Kim, 2021; Witcher, 2020; Hall, 2019; Cory et al., 2010; Symeonidou, 2009). Autism support practitioners should plea to colleges and universities to takes steps to improve ASD student supports with an aim of tackling issues of social injustice. Increasing awareness and sharing knowledge on the ASD student population is needed for all postsecondary members, including administrators, staff, faculty, students, and the community. Generating a

more informed group of stakeholders could create and foster a more supportive environment encouraging students on the spectrum to feel more comfortable and less stigmatized with disclosing their diagnosis and requesting supports.

One group of stakeholders with impact is the faculty at a college or university. Grogan (2015) reported that one of the greatest challenges in higher education is securing faculty buy-in with implementing supports for students on the spectrum. Instructor development opportunities should be offered regularly providing faculty with information but also setting the tone for others to place emphasis in assisting students with Autism in higher education. Positive and encouraging faculty interactions in the classroom could provide model behavior for ASD students and peers, which could aid in creating a more supportive and accepting environment.

Various university divisions, such as colleges of education, psychology departments and campus recreation programs, have an ideal group of faculty, staff, and students who may be willing to lead the charge or assist in service provision for students with ASD (Grogan, 2015). Some colleges offer graduates students with the opportunities to obtain course credit or practicum hours by participating in the Autism program at a university, just like the one described in this study. This would be one more way an institution could benefit from investing in an Autism program as graduate students could gain useful knowledge, experience, and skills advantageous for future employment.

Bensimon (2017) discussed an equity focus on policy as recognizing the need to reject disproportions in educational outcomes of students from underserved and underrepresented populations by shifting accountability to the institution and allowing the organization to evaluate policies and practices which create or boost inequality. Confronting issues of ethics, equity and social justice require action from the top administrators and leaders in higher education.

Northouse (2019) defined the phenomenon of leadership as a process which influences others to achieve a common goal or outcome while embracing change in the pursuit of enhancement.

Postsecondary leadership has historically situated administrators in positions of influence and power during exciting and challenging times. Institutions of higher learning have proven to be settings where innovative advancements take shape as well as crucial debates sparking change in societal issues and inequalities (Thelin, 2017). Effective leaders in higher education are those who can inspire and lead the charge towards a common goal, and all stakeholders should be included in such a transformational approach. The shared goal of twenty-first century higher education should entail components of ethics, equity, and social justice.

Leadership entails the potential to influence others, which can ultimately be described as power. Child psychologist Haim Ginott wrote "...I am the decisive element. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather" (Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers, 1972). A leader must consider how they intend to utilize power to influence and recognize the capacity to benefit others via information and access, and college administrators should seek ways to provide others with a more advantageous position and assist in overcoming barriers. Exceeding expectations and thinking outside boundaries are capabilities a leader can employ to effectively influence and motivate others while maintaining an awareness of ethical responsibilities. College leaders should look beyond the basic minimums which are often offered in postsecondary education and invest in improving ASD supports. The action of the administration could encourage other stakeholders to do the same, and the students on the spectrum would feel supported and welcomed as active members of the university community.

Influence carries the notion of inspiration, and a sense of trust in the leader is necessary

for such inspiration to transpire (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1990). Decision making should derive from a diverse collaboration where members are valued, and each voice is heard. Disability service practitioners and advocates for students on the spectrum have significant insight based on experiences and evidence-based practices in the field, and input from these professionals regarding ASD student supports should be highly esteemed and welcomed by the administration. Scholarly practitioners must recognize the need for awareness and acceptance of certain experiences effecting the way in which the world is viewed and interpreted (Jacobson and Mustafa, 2019), and the suggestions offered by these subject matter experts should be heard and regarded as speaking on behalf of a population of students who may not be able to voice for themselves.

Adaptability and thoughtful responsiveness are important in an ever-changing global economy and buy-in from stakeholders is crucial in implementing change within an organization (Altman, 2020). Now is the time for transformational leadership in higher education regarding ASD student service provision. University leaders set the tone as to how others will be influenced in accepting the need for change while remaining motivated to reach the goals of the institution. The administrators should encourage and motivate staff, faculty, students, and the community to take part in educational events and activities which promote awareness, acceptance, and understanding of individuals with Autism.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The data generated in this study consisted of responses recorded during focus group discussions from two public, four-year, research universities in Mississippi. Although the experiences and examples shared throughout the study are those of Mississippi practitioners, the information discussed and the recommendations for enhanced ASD service provision can be

applied to various colleges and universities in the United States and other parts of the world. Contributions to this study included a discussion on guiding principles motivating the work of the participants in providing supports for students on the spectrum. Many of the responses were anticipated by the researcher through viewing the work of disability service provision through the lens of various conceptual frameworks, such as critical disability theory, person-centered approach, Quality of Life theory, and evidence-based practices. Requests and accommodations often encountered in providing services for college students with Autism were presented in the data which align with common practices throughout higher education as noted in the literature. The findings regarding desired enhancements for ASD student services provision at the institutions represented in this study included recommendations which could improve supports for all postsecondary students on the spectrum. The following suggestions should be considered throughout the entire establishment of higher education.

### **Faculty Development**

Wheeler (2014) noted the need for college faculty to become knowledgeable of the various supports which could foster ASD student success in the classroom and aid in successful achievement of coursework. An examination of the literature on strategies for service provision in postsecondary education for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder revealed various strategies for services and supports, including pedagogical methods and strategies for faculty and instructors. Each student with ASD is unique and the characteristics of the diagnosis may vary greatly from one student on the spectrum to another. There are common strategies, however, acknowledged by various professionals and researchers which have been identified in supporting ASD students with communication skills, social skills, sensory differences, motor skills, learning styles, and coping skills (Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo & Shmulsky; 2013). Colleges and universities

are experiencing an increase in ASD student enrollment due in part to increased educational opportunities and life outcomes for individuals with ASD (Hurewitz & Berger, 2008). It is imperative that the faculty be equipped with the information regarding ways in which they can assist this group of students with academic success in the classroom and provide guidance for students who need to seek supports outside the classroom.

College faculty are not habitually trained in ways to effectively support or engage students with ASD as part of typical professional development. There is an availability of evidence-based teaching strategies for the classroom that could be offered through a series of faculty development opportunities. The findings of this study encourage the need for faculty development departments at various institutions of higher learning to develop or expand on instructor training to support ASD students. Some universities, like the one described in the data from the first focus group, currently offers faculty development opportunities in this area but still expressed the desire to offer more training. Universities, like the one represented by staff from the college without an Autism program, shared the faculty development efforts regarding students with ASD which were beginning just prior to the COVID pandemic. At the time, it was noted that this institution was aware of ASD student dissatisfaction and recognized the need to provide enhanced supports. Faculty development and disability services representatives had initiated discussions with faculty and collaborative steps were being taken to develop a plan which included faculty development opportunities. It was revealed in the data that the time had come for this university to resume those efforts as this population of students still need to be better served.

College students with ASD often have adequate cognitive ability for academic success but many lack the social or coping skills for degree obtainment (Wheeler, 2014; Gobbo &

Shmulsky; 2013). Students are not required to disclose their diagnosis, and characteristics of ASD may go unnoticed in the classroom until issues arise due to difficulties with sensory processing, social deficits, anxiety, learning styles, and communication difficulties (US Autism and Asperger Association, 2013). Faculty development could offer potential strategies and supports which could be utilized when encountering students who exhibit the attributes commonly associated with ASD. Even if a faculty is not aware of a student diagnosis, the behavior exhibited by the student in the classroom could be indicative of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Having an awareness that these traits may be suggestive of a diagnosis could allow for the faculty to implement strategies and determine if these approaches appear to benefit the students (Wheeler, 2014).

Austin (2014) highlighted the influence supportive faculty have in driving pursuits for social advancement and combating challenges to diversity, access, and student equity. Offering training to faculty could reinforce the ethics, equity, and social justice component entailed in enhancing ASD student supports. Recognizing these efforts as ways to address and overcome educational and societal barriers for individuals on the spectrum could gain the support of persuasive faculty who could engage the university community and all stakeholder to seek ways to better serve the ASD student population. Providing information to those who have the ability to influence others is key in enhancing supports for students with Autism (Austin, 2014).

### **Increased Awareness Efforts Utilizing Various Departments**

Efforts to raise awareness and provide information regarding ASD student supports should be offered to more than just faculty in higher education. Wheeler (2014) emphasized the importance of including non-academic college disciplines to effectively impact the postsecondary experience for students on the spectrum. Involving various departments and staff

in service provision could create pathways for students with Autism to actively be a part of the university culture, build relationships with others, and make connections which could establish networking opportunities that lead to potential employment prospects.

It is recommended by the researcher that colleges and universities employ a staff devoted to ASD student service provision who could establish collaborative efforts with various departments, faculty, staff, and the entire student body. This representative would ideally be situated in a specialized Autism program if applicable, or a department which has strong ties or participation in university diversity and community engagement efforts. Colleges across the country are investing more in programs regarding diversity awareness and creating equitable opportunities for all citizens (Kruse, 2020). Higher education is leading the way in not only fostering environments of awareness and respectfulness, but also embracing the variety of diverse aspects of humanity, including differences regarding race, religion, ethnicity, age, sexuality, gender identity/expression, class, and disability (Nunes, 2021). Students with Autism should be identified as a critical piece of the diverse student population. A staff dedicated to increasing awareness on the needs of the ASD student group could oversee training and promotional efforts by offering information, education, development opportunities, events, and activities throughout the campus community geared towards supporting students on the spectrum.

### **Administrative Influence for Enhancing ASD Supports**

Disability service professionals in higher education are currently a vital part of ASD student success, but these experts in the field cannot be expected to accomplish this task alone. As mentioned above, the roles of various institutional staff, faculty and the student body are needed to heighten awareness of Autism and generate an accepting college culture where

students on the spectrum feel supported and thrive. The role of the administration is crucial in making ASD student supports a university priority. Willingness on the part of higher education leadership to actively support and participate in enhancing supports for students with Autism could set the tone for all other stakeholders to follow. Research has highlighted that endorsement from college administrators is integral in creating a culture of support and acceptance for students with Autism (Stairway to STEM). Now is the time for college leaders to take note of the recommendations from practitioners in the field of ASD student service provision and act in a way that influences and inspires stakeholders to view Autism student supports as an important part of the institutional diversity and community engagement efforts.

Diverse collaboration from various departments and university representatives should be conducted with the support and active participation from the college leadership. Disability service practitioners and other advocates for students on the spectrum could share insight based on experiences and evidence-based practices in the field. A plan could be designed to assess and identify the needs of the students at the university who have Autism Spectrum Disorder, as well as the information and training needed by faculty and staff to better support those students. As scholarly practitioners in higher education it is necessary to recognize that evaluating and generating outcomes for Autism supports could aid in gaging if endeavors implemented by the institution have increased overall awareness and acceptance regarding the ASD student population. Studies could transpire measuring ASD graduation rates at various institutions which have implemented the recommendations of this study and look for connections to degree obtainment and other areas of academic success when offered adequate college supports. Employment rates of former students on the spectrum could also be studied to see if there is any association with higher employment rates and participation in satisfactory postsecondary ASD

service provision.

The ultimate outcome of measuring ASD student success in relation to the level and availability of supports is the creation or expansion of specialized Autism programs in institutions of higher learning. Recommendations presented by subject matter experts in the field of ASD supports should be recognized as an appeal to college administrators to acknowledge the need for tailored Autism supports and encourage all staff, faculty, students, and the community to recognize the societal value of investing in the ASD student population who could become esteemed and contributing members of society. This group of students could entail the next leaders of innovation, art, politics, and science, such as Bill Gates, Nicola Tesla, Emily Dickenson, and Thomas Jefferson who are all believed to have Autism Spectrum Disorder (Applied Behavior Analysis Programs Guide).

Funding specialized programs could be quite challenging, but practices could be implemented where similar services are offered to students with Autism by utilizing the student body and oversight from various faculty and staff. Collaboration among various departments and administration could identify ways in which supports could be provided for ASD college students within an institution of higher learning. Various schools and departments within a university could offer services to students on the spectrum which count as course credit. Psychology students, for example, could work with peers who are on the spectrum by practicing social skills in hypothetical situations that are likely encountered in college. Graduate students in various fields could assist ASD students in communication skills and social skills as part of the graduate program requirements for their particular degrees. Such practices could be established and carried out through collaborative efforts among already existing programs, faculty, and staff.

## **Plans for Dissemination of Findings**

Plans for disseminating the findings of this study are multifaceted and would require the assistance of various postsecondary stakeholders across the state. Reaching out to higher education staff and faculty at Mississippi colleges would be employed to identify ways to circulate the information to the university personnel who could be persuasive in promoting enhanced ASD supports at various institutions. It is hopeful that faculty development departments will be open to reviewing a summary of the findings and utilize the recommendations in designing an instructor development series on ASD supports and practices. Obtaining backing from the higher education departments could potentially aid in establishing a connection with the faculty development department. It would also be advantageous to secure meetings with diversity and community engagement staff to show the significance of acknowledging the ASD student population as part of their departmental endeavors. The higher education faculty could likely provide contact information and promote the need to have such discussions with the appropriate personnel.

Any other recommendations from higher education faculty to connect with staff or students who could be influential in enhancing ASD student supports would be welcomed. One initial desire to conduct this study was a hope to further educate and inform postsecondary stakeholders on all levels about Autism Spectrum Disorder. Increasing awareness and informing others about individuals on the spectrum could reveal the potential that lies within students on the spectrum. This state could benefit from the talent and skills offered by these citizens who could become essential members of the Mississippi workforce.

## **Plans for Future Research**

The available data regarding ASD postsecondary students is quite dated with Cox and

South (2017) presenting the most recent description of this group of students as consisting of one or two percent of the American college student population. The findings of this study contribute to an area of research which is lacking, and more scholarly practitioners should seek ways to conduct studies on the ASD postsecondary student population, and highlight the supports offered for these students.

The data in the study representation consists of two comparable colleges in the state of Mississippi. Expanding on the responses from this study by including various types of institutions throughout the state would reveal a more comprehensive presentation on the views of postsecondary disability services staff in Mississippi. Stimulating results of such studies could reveal the numbers and types of college cultures in the state described as accepting and accommodating for students on the spectrum. It would also provide a detailed description of the various supports offered through Mississippi colleges and show if the common practices implemented and offered by the institutions in this study align with other colleges in the state. It would also be noteworthy to indicate how many of the colleges throughout Mississippi have a specialized Autism program. Inquiry could be devoted to the level of services and ASD student satisfaction at schools who have programs compared to those colleges without programs.

The responses from the participants in the study also created an avenue for further research on the collaboration between the postsecondary offices of disability services and housing. The residential respondents in the focus group discussions offered illustrations of work being carried out in ways that strongly advocate for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. A study on postsecondary housing professionals and the services offered to students with ASD may generate noteworthy findings which could be shared with residential programs in colleges throughout higher education.

## **Manuscript Summary**

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are enrolling in institutions of higher learning at increasing rates and are estimated to make up roughly one to two percent of the postsecondary student population (Cox & South, 2017; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as cited in Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Heightened awareness and enhanced special education practices have partly contributed to this amplified ASD presence on college campuses, and universities should be prepared to accommodate the needs of this growing student population (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013).

The transition from secondary education to the postsecondary setting presents unanticipated differences, however, in institutional accountability. The variances often result in unexpected challenges for students on the spectrum as there is less accountability placed on the colleges and more responsibility required of the student to report the disability and request accommodations. Students who had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and received services in the K-12 setting often do not disclose their disability when admitted to college. Communication deficits, social anxiety, the fear of stigma attached to receiving accommodations, feelings of newfound independence, or confidence in achieving academic success without supports have been identified as reasons why many college students do not voluntarily register with the office of disability services (Newman & Madaus, 2014; Martin, 2010).

Students who do self-disclose are often displeased with the supports accessible in postsecondary education and have expressed concerns with college staff and administrators (Sparks, 2020). With the dissatisfaction noted regarding ASD student service provision, it is not surprising that graduation rates for students on the spectrum remain low at 41% (Cox & South,

2017). Students, families, practitioners, and other advocates have voiced fears about the impact that these inadequate services could have on future employment and quality of life for individuals with Autism (White et al., 2016). A review of the literature provided common strategies and pedagogical approaches for effectively supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to address communication deficits, issues with social skills, sensory differences, motor skills, learning styles, and coping inabilities (Wheeler, 2014). The information regarding these common practices is readily accessible, yet postsecondary faculty and staff are not typically trained on evidence-based strategies and pedagogical approaches which benefit students on the spectrum in various aspects of college life (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2013). Increasing awareness and providing faculty and staff with training opportunities regarding ASD supports would likely result in improved services for students on the spectrum (White et al., 2016). The staff and faculty could influence the entire campus community encouraging students to be accepting and embrace peers with Autism (Austin, 2014).

Complications, however, often stall efforts for improving ASD student supports. There is a wide range of functioning associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder resulting in a need for individualized supports. Providing tailored and specialized services can be difficult with insufficient staffing and funding allocated to accommodating students on the spectrum. A lack of resources can be attributed to inadequate service provision, but this can be an indication of a larger systemic issue in higher education regarding the marginalization of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Approaching ASD student service provision through a critical disability theory lens reveals the social norms which have defined impairments and resulted in the stigmatization of people labeled as having a disability (Hall, 2019). People who are categorized as disabled often encounter experiences of exclusion and are faced with challenges

due to the characteristics of their identity (Hall, 2019; Cory et al., 2010). Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder have likely encountered discrimination throughout their lifespan leading to barriers in accessing a quality education (Cory et al., 2010). American higher education has the opportunity to change the current climate regarding ASD supports by fostering environments of acceptance. Institutional leaders must set the tone by actively supporting and participating in enhancing supports for students with Autism.

The findings of this study reveal the insights, experiences, expertise, and recommendations of Mississippi practitioners in the field of ASD service provision from two comparable public, four-year, research universities. The data provided an overview of various guiding principles and motivations in the work done by the participants in supporting students on the spectrum. A description was provided of the various services offered at each institution, and limitations and concerns arose when discussing these accommodations. Each group provided suggestions and desires for Autism service enhancement in higher education.

The insight from the staff who participated in the study included recommendations for improving ASD student supports at their respective colleges, but these conclusions could also be applied to various colleges and universities throughout the nation. Findings of the study show the need for collaboration between various departments and university staff to provide faculty development opportunities and implement initiatives to increase awareness and acceptance throughout colleges campuses. A petition is made for administrators and college leadership to support and influence all stakeholders to invest in ASD student supports. Various ideas are presented by the researcher on ways to initiate heightened awareness and offer improved services with the goal of creating Autism programs in colleges and universities or expanding Autism programs that are currently established in institutions of higher learning.

The responses presented in the data validate the need to address the problem of practice identified for the purpose of this research concerning supports and services for college students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Colleges and universities should follow the suggestions of the participants in the study and offer supports which could in time break down barriers to academic success. The implications of this study could offer enhanced service provision for students on the spectrum which entails an emancipatory purpose by rejecting societal structures that have resulted in oppression for this population of students (Hall, 2019; Cory et al., 2010). Hearing the voices of the contributors to this study and implementing the recommendations presented would reflect continuing efforts in higher education geared toward addressing issues of ethics, equity, and social justice for marginalized citizens, which should include postsecondary students with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

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## VITA

Susan B. Jenkins was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and was raised mostly in the Northern part of the state after her father's career in the pulp wood industry resulted in a family move. After graduating from Bruce High School in 1997, she began working on a bachelor's degree in Psychology at Mississippi State University. Susan spent one year in Starkville and then transferred to the University of Mississippi to continue her studies and begin part-time employment serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). She completed her undergraduate studies in December 2022 and further advanced in her profession with the IDD population.

Recognizing the marginalization and educational barriers encountered by this population, Susan decided to pursue graduate work in Higher Education in 2007. Eight years in the field had positioned her with an immense desire to further advocate for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, particularly those with Autism Spectrum Disorder. She earned a Master of Arts in Higher Education at the University of Mississippi in 2009 and was shortly promoted to a community home director in Northeast Mississippi where she oversaw a residential program for individuals with IDD.

The interest in better serving citizens with IDD continued to grow and eventually motivated Susan to begin her doctoral studies with the intent to research postsecondary disability services for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Susan was admitted to the Higher Education Doctor of Education program in 2019.