The Journal of Higher Education

ISSN: 0022-1546 (Print) 1538-4640 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/uhej20

"I Always Ended Up Getting Close to Other People Who are Autistic": Autistic College Students' Friendship Development

Brett Ranon Nachman, Karly B. Isaacson, Bradley E. Cox & Catherine Tobin McDermott

To cite this article: Brett Ranon Nachman, Karly B. Isaacson, Bradley E. Cox & Catherine Tobin McDermott (18 Jun 2025): "I Always Ended Up Getting Close to Other People Who are Autistic": Autistic College Students' Friendship Development, The Journal of Higher Education, DOI: 10.1080/00221546.2025.2497184

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2025.2497184

Published online: 18 Jun 2025.

THE JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2025.2497184

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

"I Always Ended Up Getting Close to Other People Who are Autistic": Autistic College Students' Friendship Development

Brett Ranon Nachman[a], Karly B. Isaacson[b], Bradley E. Cox[b], and Catherine Tobin McDermott[c]

[a]Rehabilitation, Human Resources & Comm Disorders, University of Pittsburgh, Fayetteville, USA; [b]Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education, Michigan State University, East Lansing, USA; [c]McDermott Autism Services, USA

ABSTRACT

Finding community is often a pivotal component of the college experience. With autistic students on the rise across higher education, an opportunity exists to discover how this marginalized community uniquely builds relationships, especially given the nuances associated with their communication and ways of finding like-minded individuals. This phenomenological study explores how autistic college students foster social connectedness with the goal of understanding how higher education may better support this unique student population. We conducted interviews with 43 autistic undergraduate college students, as part of a larger nationwide study on autistic college student success. Our findings illuminate three ways autistic college students foster social connectedness: engaging in autistic spaces, practicing autistic authenticity, and bonding over shared interests. We build on the theoretical model of belonging for college students with disabilities by showing the importance of modality, vulnerability, and niche outlets as helping foster connection among autistic college students. We encourage practitioners to build more clubs and affinity spaces for autistic students to connect, which may prompt researchers to explore how particular settings help autistic students in building bonds.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 23 October 2024
Accepted 17 April 2025

KEYWORDS
Friendship; autism; autistic college students; college students; belongingness

Introduction

Time and again, developing friendships and belongingness remains one of the primary priorities among college students (e.g., McCabe, 2019; Scanlon et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2018). One recent study, for example, found that both the number of one's close friends on campus and the extent of emotional connections with those friends were associated with positive outcomes such as 6-year graduation rate and college grade point average (Bronkema & Bowman, 2019). Traditionally, conversations on friendships among college students privilege common spaces for socialization, including Greek life (Salinas et al., 2019),

CONTACT Brett Ranon Nachman BrettRanonNachman@gmail.com.

student organizations (Glass & Gesing, 2018), and social media (Yang, 2022). These settings can surely foster connection, and spaces like dorms and classes may lead students to identify shared interests (Patterson et al., 2022).

For autistic college students, whose norms and distinct ways of navigating the world often differ from their neurotypical peers, the goals remain the same (Frost et al., 2019). That said, contrasts in communication and methods of engagement can sometimes prove challenging in finding points of connection between autistic and non-autistic peers (Crompton et al., 2020; Stockwell et al., 2021). Autism manifests through a deliberative processing style that can make social connection forming with non-autistic people particularly difficult (Price, 2022). While these components of autism may make social support among this unique group of students especially important, existent work on the friendship and relationship building fronts have long privileged non-autistic perspectives, even in autism studies (Griffin, 2019; Sedgewick et al., 2018). Yet, opportunities exist for disentangling the factors that contribute to autistic college students developing meaningful friendships that support their college experiences. This phenomenological study explores how autistic college students foster social connectedness with the goal of understanding how higher education may better support this unique student population.

Literature review

Whereas sometimes media depictions of autistic individuals are that they prefer solitude (e.g., Rudy, 2023; Willingham, 2024), research shows how autistic young adults seek many friendships with people who they share similar interests, as well as prefer to maintain current relationships (Finke et al., 2019). When autistic people can find spaces where they must not follow social norms, and with people who pay no mind to their differences in behaviors or preferences, they feel successful in their friendship development (Sosnowy et al., 2019). Finding shared spaces where groups can build meaningful bonds and solidarity, otherwise known as affinity groups, have long been fruitful for minoritized communities (Madsen et al., 2023), and similarly offer viability for autistic communities via autism-specific college support programs (ASPs; Nachman et al., 2022) and neurodiversity clubs (Kim et al., 2024).

In recent years, models of safe, brave, and counterspaces have emerged on college campuses as part of broader efforts to foster community while simultaneously encouraging social advocacy among various marginalized student populations (Keels, 2020). In some instances, these spaces may take the form of a traditional student organization, while in other contexts they may occur through different types of platforms (e.g., through social media; Moral et al., 2024). Notably, while such communities may focus on a specific marginalized identity, scholars have identified the importance of ensuring that such groups

also honor students' multiple and intersecting identities in order to support overall student well-being (Keels, 2020). These findings suggest that spaces supporting minoritized students can foster social support when affinity groups address students' identities holistically, rather than focusing on one aspect alone.

Although understanding various supports for promoting socialization can be helpful, conceptions of socialization may present differently for autistic individuals compared with members of other minoritized groups. Autistic students often share many similar goals compared with their neurotypical peers in having friends (Black et al., 2022), but have been stereotyped for their alternative communication patterns and differences in engaging in social experiences (Sasson et al., 2017). Recent scholarship notes that common difficulties in areas such as assignment planning, time management, multitasking, and group work can negatively impact students' social relationships (Barnhill, 2016; Locke et al., 2024; Myrvold et al., 2021). While these challenges are important to consider, other recent work notes that there are major differences between third- and first-personal accounts of autism in academic research discourse, and that third-person accounts tend to perpetuate epistemic injustice toward autistic individuals (Catala et al., 2021). This issue heightens the importance of drawing from autistic scholarly voices in work that seeks to better understand the unique socialization tendencies of autistic populations.

Given autism's nature as a typically non-apparent disability, autistic students must also navigate potentially high-risk decisions regarding when and whether to disclose to peers in their efforts to form shared connections around autism (Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020). Instead of disclosing, many autistic students may choose to "mask" or "camouflage," meaning that they attempt to conceal characteristics associated with their autism to blend in with neurotypical peers (Frost et al., 2019; Price, 2022). While the act of "unmasking" may help autistic students establish greater autism identity salience or authenticity to one's self, prior scholarship also notes that there are various risks associated with revealing one's disability in an ableist society (see Brake, 2024; Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020). These risks, ranging from social stigmatization to negative impacts on mental health, can make the decision of whether and where to unmask complicated and highly individualistic. When considering how these traits and choices may impact autistic people more generally, prior scholarship has noted that autistic individuals may appear as though they do not want friendships, even though that myth was identified as being false when researchers gathered perspectives of autistic individuals themselves (Bennett et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, a dichotomy emerges; at times autistic college students are most at ease with people who hold a shared affiliation (Crompton et al., 2020) and they may concurrently feel stigmatized in autistic spaces[1] and/or not relate

over distinct manifestations of autism characteristics (Frost et al., 2019, Nachman, 2023). One reality exists, though: autistic students, much like their neurotypical peers, want to make friends and seek emotional intimacy, though sometimes experience struggles with others misunderstanding their communication patterns (Müller et al., 2008). Some outlets, such as student organizations, appear effective in building relationships; here autistic students can "find like-minded people" who hold similar and often niche interests (Bailey et al., 2020, p. 1086). What remains most in question is how and where higher education institutions can support autistic students' meaningful and lasting friendships in college.

Theoretical framework

Our study draws from concepts associated with Vaccaro et al. (2015) theoretical model of belonging for college students with disabilities. This theory serves a mechanism for understanding, in our work, how autistic college students foster social connectedness. Most participants in Vaccaro et al. (2015) empirical study used to develop their theoretical model had invisible or non-apparent disabilities, like autism. This led us to believe that the theory may have applicability to autistic college students. Beyond the relatively similar samples between our study and the sample used to inform Vaccaro et al. (2015) theory, the theoretical model of belonging for college students with disabilities promotes the cyclical nature among three factors that support belongingness: advocating for oneself across campus settings; building meaningful and supportive social relationships; and mastering the various demands that college life necessitates (Vaccaro et al., 2015). We find this disability-centered theory as greatly relevant for our inquiry that centers autistic learners, since it recognizes the processes of feeling connections with others based on how one uniquely navigates campus experiences not quite designed with their priorities in mind. Our understandings of autism are rooted in the social model of disability, which asserts that disability is a product of social oppression (Oliver, 2013; see "Positionality" for an overview of how our understandings of disability are shaped by personal experiences). Our use of Vaccaro and colleagues' work draws from this understanding to illustrate how higher education environments, rather than innate deficits, can create barriers in autistic students' efforts to make friends.

Two key sampling differences places our study in a prime position to expand on the applicability of the theoretical model of belonging for college students with disabilities. First, Vaccaro et al. (2015) were interested in understanding the development of a sense of belonging specifically during post-secondary transitions, leading them to limit their sample to first-year college students alone. Our study seeks to broaden that focus by exploring the applicability of their belonging theory over the entirety of disabled—and, in

this case, autistic—student undergraduate education spans. Second, Vaccaro and colleagues drew participants from a single public research university. Our study, on the other hand, draws from numerous public and private two- and four-year institutions across the United States. In both regards, our study is well suited to expand on our understanding of Vaccaro et al. (2015) theoretical model of belonging for college students with disabilities to additional disabled college student populations.

Study methods

To explore how autistic college students foster social connectedness, we employed a descriptive phenomenological approach (Colaizzi, 1978), recognizing that capturing the essence of their experiences around friendship required us to question our own belief systems and interpretations of the phenomenon. Core to framing our inquiry was an emphasis on prioritizing the subject-phenomenon relation where we aimed to uncover meaning around social connectedness through encouraging participants to process relevant situations and contexts (Englander, 2012). Our phenomenological interviews would thus center not the anecdote or example so much as the individual's lived experiences and interpretations of friendships and social experiences (Englander, 2012).

Whereas traditional descriptive phenomenological approaches, such as by Giorgi (1985), follow the notion of bracketing to set aside researchers' interpretations (Vagle, 2009), we instead accounted for our distinct connections to both the phenomenon of friendship by virtue of our connection to disabled and autistic communities. Yet we embraced what Giorgi (1985) emphasizes regarding searching for invariant psychological meanings. In this case, as friendship represented the concept we sought to disentangle its true meaning, albeit in the case of autistic learners, we reviewed existent literature on friendships, examined interview transcripts with an intent on uncovering how friendship manifested without placing an interpretive lens, and read for a sense of the whole to reach a definition of friendship (Vagle, 2009).

Data collection

This data derives from our larger mixed-methods study on autistic college student success, in which we enlisted autistic undergraduate college students across the United States via a variety of means, including through disability services offices, autism organizations, college autism programs, and social media. We employed this array of approaches to make the survey familiar and accessible to autistic students, including those who may not be fully out about their autism diagnoses or have access to formal accommodations or supports at their postsecondary

education institutions. In particular this data comes from the second wave of data collection in Fall 2023, in which 505 eligible students completed an online survey, for which students, at the end of the survey, could indicate their interest in potentially being enlisted for an interview to elaborate about their experiences.

Through maximum variation sampling, in which we prioritized participants often underrepresented in autism research (e.g., students of color, women), we contacted 72 students for potential interview participation (Douglas, 2022). In the end, 43 participated and received a $25 gift card for participation. Interviews averaged 63 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Although phenomenological studies often involve smaller sample sizes, the level of depth often influences the number of students involved (Colaizzi, 1978). In our case, as friendship and social connectedness served as only a piece of the interview that naturally surfaced, involving more perspectives behooves disentangling the phenomenon with greater richness.

We designed our interview protocol to allow students' conceptions of success to naturally surface, asking questions about people who have supported them, times when they felt (un)successful in college, and factors that fostered their success, among other topics. Although we suspected friendship would emerge as a top conversational piece, as evidenced in the high importance that autistic students placed on it in what they note contributes to their success via Wave 1 data (Cox et al., 2025), we intentionally kept our questions broad. None were specifically focused on friendship, as we allowed students to naturally bring it up or, as applicable, tied back to their open-ended survey responses to spark dialogue. To honor students' comfort, interviews could take place over Zoom using video, only audio, or solely through the chat function. We also employed robust means to ensure the consistency and thoughtfulness of interviews involving autistic individuals, including piloting the protocol and engaging in practice interviews with current or recent autistic college students. By the end of this pilot phase all interviewers had not only engaged in at least two practice interviews, but also underwent a virtual training on interviewing autistic people developed by Waisman et al. (2023).

Of our 43 interview participants, 63% identified as people of color, 42% were women, 33% identified as trans, 81% reported a sexual orientation that was not straight/heterosexual; 19% were current community college students; and 49% transferred from a community college. This dataset mirrors our maximum variation sampling processes where we oversampled based on race and community college status; that said, the high proportions of women, trans, and LGBQ + students is not too dissimilar from our larger dataset, paralleling increasing scholarly attention to the co-occurrence between autism and LGBTQ + identities (e.g., Weir et al., 2021). See Table 1.

Table 1. Participant demographics and campus involvement experiences.

Name	Campus Involvement or Community Building Example	Autism Diagnosis	Age	Race	Gender Identity	Sexuality	Year in College	Current Enrollment in Autism Support Program
Alice	Online disability justice book club	Process of Getting Diagnosed	21	Black or African American	Non-Binary	Queer	Sophomore	No
Amber	Ultimate Frisbee team	Self	21	White	Woman	Lesbian	Junior	No
Ana	N/A	Formal	24	Indigenous, Native American, or Alaskan Native; Hispanic or Latinx/o/a; White	Woman; Gender Non-Conforming	Straight/Heterosexual; Questioning or Unsure	Sophomore	No
Anej	Teaching assistant	Formal	19	White	Woman; Gender Neutral	Straight/Heterosexual	Sophomore	No
Apple	Disability Culture Center	Formal	26	White	Woman	Queer	Senior	Yes
Astraea	eSports	Formal	20	White	Non-Binary	Pansexual	Junior	No
Bella	Adventure club	Formal	18	Hispanic or Latinx/o/a	Woman	Bisexual	Freshman	No
Bones	Neuro-queer group	Self	18	White	Non-Binary; Gender Neutral	Asexual; aromantic	Freshman	No
Daisy	Choir	Formal	18	White	Woman	Questioning or unsure; Gray aromantic/gray asexual	Freshman	No
Dwayne	Gender and sexual minorities group	Formal	24	White	Man; Gender Non-Conforming; Gender Fluid; Questioning; Bigender	Bisexual	"About halfway through"	Yes
Ease	Autism support program	Formal	20	Asian	Don't Care	Don't Care	Junior	Yes
Elizabeth	American Sign Language club	Formal	19	White	Woman	Straight/Heterosexual	Senior	Yes
Evi	Volunteer	Process of Getting Diagnosed	20	Black or African American	Woman; Gender Fluid	Bisexual; Queer	Freshman	No
Evyn	Campus accessibility committee	Formal	20	Hispanic or Latinx/o/a; White	Woman; Non-Binary; Autigender	Asexual	Junior	No
Gien	Native American student club	Formal	18	Indigenous, Native American, or Alaskan Native; White	Genderqueer	Pansexual	"Finished my first year" classes	No
Herbert	Engineering council	Self	19	Hispanic or Latinx/o/a; White	Non-binary	Queer; Asexual; Biromantic	Sophomore	No
Hope	Residence Hall Council	Self	24	White	Woman	Gay; Asexual	Junior	No

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Name	Campus Involvement or Community Building Example	Autism Diagnosis	Age	Race	Gender Identity	Sexuality	Year in College	Current Enrollment in Autism Support Program
Janel	Cat shelter volunteer	Formal	20	White	Woman	Straight/Heterosexual	Sophomore	No
Jeremy	Music club	Formal	19	White	Man	Straight/Heterosexual	Sophomore	No
John	Photography club	Formal	21	White	Man	Straight/Heterosexual	N/A	Yes
Judy	Accessibility studies club	Self	21	White	Woman; Gender Non-Conforming	Bisexual; Queer; Aromantic	Junior	No
just	Disability club	Formal	23	White	Man	Straight/Heterosexual	Sophomore	Yes
Kimberly	Dungeons & Dragons	Formal	19	White	Woman	Bisexual	Senior	No
Lindsay	Fiber arts circle	Formal	21	White	Woman; Gender Non-Binary; Gender Neutral	Lesbian	Senior	No
Maddie	N/A	Self	20	White	Woman	Gay; Asexual	Senior	No
Mary Johnson	N/A	Self	19	White	Non-Binary	Queer; Asexual	Junior	No
Mavis	Research assistant	Formal	21	Asian; White	Non-Binary	Lesbian	Senior	No
Michelle Smith	Campus TV studio	Formal	18	White	Woman	Prefer to not disclose	Freshman	Yes
Orange	Circus club	Formal	18	White	Man; Gender Non-Conforming	Queer; Asexual	Freshman	No
Parker	Autism club	Self	21	Asian	Non-Binary	Pansexual	Junior	No
Peter	Film society	Formal	23	White	Man	Straight/Heterosexual	Senior	Yes
Romi	N/A	Formal	19	Hispanic or Latinx/o/a; White	Non-Binary	Lesbian; Queer	Senior	No
Rosa	Meditation group	Self	21	Hispanic or Latinx/o/a; White	Woman	Bisexual	Freshman	No
Skeletor	Engineering ambassador	Self	22	White	Woman	Bisexual; Asexual	Senior	No
Skia	Neurodiversity program	Formal	21	Black or African American; White	Gender Neutral	Asexual	Senior	No
Socks	N/A	Formal	18	White	Non-Binary	Queer	Senior	No
Summer	Musical theater	Formal	21	White	Woman	Straight/Heterosexual; Questioning or unsure	Sophomore	No
Taylor	A capella group	Formal	24	Asian	Non-Binary; Genderqueer	Queer	Senior	No
Tim	Wheelchair sports	Formal	21	White	Man	Asexual; Pansexual	Sophomore	No
TJ	Drum corps	Formal	20	Asian	Man	Straight/Heterosexual	Junior	Yes
Trees	Outdoor programs department	Formal	20	White	Non-Binary	Bisexual; Queer	"Senior by credit hours"	No

(*Continued*)

Table 1. (Continued).

Name	Campus Involvement or Community Building Example	Autism Diagnosis	Age	Race	Gender Identity	Sexuality	Year in College	Current Enrollment in Autism Support Program
Worms	Mutual aid group	Self	21	White	Non-Binary	Bisexual; Asexual	Junior	No
Wren	Disability support program	Formal	21	Asian	Non-Binary; Gender Non-Conforming	Queer; Asexual; Questioning or Unsure	Junior	No

Data analysis

Following each interview, we engaged in member checking by sending back summaries of interviews to participants, creating space for them to offer clarification and edits (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Though not all 43 participants engaged in this process, we aimed to make the process as straightforward and succinct as possible for students to know how we made sense of the central points from their interview. With each interview team members not only wrote and revised interview summaries, but also crafted individual memos, following a template we assembled prior to data collection, to reflect on our interview process and content that participants shared. These documents also represented a space for jotting emergent ideas, including the prominence of friendship as a recurring theme. Our discussions during and following the interview process entailed figuring out potential concepts to examine in greater depth, for which friendship rose high on the list.

For our broader study, Author 1 formed initial descriptive codes that stemmed from both the primary domains of students' lives (e.g., academics, community) and our larger dataset. From this point all qualitative coders engaged in test coding of several interviews—specifically identified as multiply minoritized autistic students—to build familiarity with codes and ensure high inter-coder reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). We selected these transcripts to work with to guarantee that the perspectives of autistic people, whose opinions are often discounted, shaped the rest of our analysis. From this point, the team refined the codebook to include a mix of deductive and inductive codes. For this study, we pulled codes on friendship, as well as other descriptive codes that referenced friends (e.g., *campus life*, *peer engagement*). We employed approaches in alignment with Colaizzi's (1978) method, including, but not limited to: familiarizing ourselves with the data through reading and editing transcripts to understand the phenomenon; pinpointing significant statements around social experiences; and assembling meanings of friendship through engaging in further open coding.

Trustworthiness and positionality

We shaped the research design to align with autism-inclusive principles noted by the Academic Autism Spectrum Partnership in Research and Education (AASPIRE), including simplifying the consent language, offering various modes of participation, testing the interview protocol with multiple autistic college students and recent graduates, sending the interview protocol to participants in advance for elevating familiarity, and using concrete questions about their experiences (Nicolaidis et al., 2019). Our team for this manuscript includes autistic and/or neurodivergent authors (Authors 1, 2, and 3), who contributed insights drawn from their own experiences on the unique

socialization patterns and experiences of neurodivergent individuals, as well as Author 4, who has extensive experience in working with autistic students transitioning to college and dealing with new experiences like building friendships. The larger study also encompasses diversity based on disciplinary background, gender, sexuality, race, and disability, adding to the richness of our analyses.

Findings

Our findings illuminate three themes within the phenomenon of how autistic college students foster social connectedness: engaging in autistic spaces, practicing autistic authenticity, and bonding over shared interests.

Engaging in autistic spaces

During interviews, participants highlighted the value of engaging in various types of postsecondary autistic spaces. Embedding themselves in these spaces afforded connectedness for many participants, including Worms:

> We come from a sense of understanding with that, too, because we know that there are difficulties with communication and sensory inputs from our environments around us. So there's a lot of mutual respect and understanding with each other because of that.

In the passage above, Worms described the "respect and understanding" that could come from being part of an autistic space on campus. During their interviews, 17/43 participants mentioned the importance of having sensory friendly environments on campus to support autistic students. Similarly, 15/43 students mentioned engaging in autism-specific college support programs (ASPs; Nachman et al., 2022) at their colleges out, of the 17 participants who indicated that they were aware that their school had an ASP. For many, these intentional spaces also materialized in meaningful friendships with autistic peers. Meanwhile, John's program and making fellow autistic friends reassured him that he's "not alone in the way that you think, in the way that you interpret the world, and that there's other people out there." Across these experiences, participants highlighted the value of being surrounded by peers who truly understood what it was like to be an autistic college student.

Some participants discussed how engaging in autistic spaces could be particularly helpful at certain junctures. Wren, for example, shared that, "I think honestly the biggest thing with that was just knowing that I had support if I needed it, knowing that I had somewhere to turn, especially since I was pretty newly diagnosed." In Wren's case, having an autistic support network was particularly helpful when navigating a new autism diagnosis. 15/43 participants similarly described navigating the autism diagnosis process during college, with several pointing to the utility of having an autistic support

network in helping them meet the challenges of obtaining a diagnosis alongside the other demands of college.

Finding an autistic community on campus came naturally for some participants, including Janel and Kimberly. As Janel shared, "I think I always ended up getting close to other people who are autistic without realizing they were diagnosed at the time." Janel described how connections with other autistic people occurred naturally based on personality similarities. Similarly, Kimberly recalled how, "Though I do not have more than a handful of friends on campus, a few of them are autistic. It 'wasn't intentional, but I guess it just kinda happens sometimes.'" Kimberly described how making friends could be generally difficult for her, but that multiple people in her inner friendship circle were autistic. As in Janel's case, Kimberly did not seek out friendships based on a shared autism diagnosis.

Participants helped elucidate why connecting with other autistic peers often became easier during college. Maddie explained that,

> in college . . . I've met more people who are neurodivergent, who are open about it, which isn't something I had experience with . . . I think that's been really positive and affirming and when I think of interactions that I've enjoyed, that's kind of the common thread.

Maddie described how college became a liberating space where autistic and other neurodivergent people could be more open about their identities, in contrast to the expectation that neurodivergent qualities be repressed at her more conservative religious high school. With less pressure to mask, Maddie could enjoy interactions with her peers that were more "positive and affirming" compared to her previous experiences. Whether sharing their autism experiences directly, like in Maddie's example, or feeling able to be more open about personality traits consistent with autism, as in Janel and Kimberly's cases, the college atmosphere appeared particularly conducive to organically meeting and forming friendships with other autistic peers.

Although these organic connections proved promising for some participants, others reported needing more support to connect them to their campus autistic communities. Summer, for example, suggested that autistic students may benefit from university support to facilitate connections: "fostering that community and actually accommodating the fact that we want to socialize." For Summer, who did not meet autistic peers or find her way to autistic spaces organically, forming social connections proved difficult. By connecting her to other autistic individuals, Summer believed that her university could better support her in forming a sense of community that she felt unprepared to establish on her own. Similarly, without those structured opportunities provided by the university, Mavis noted how "you feel like the black sheep of the

campus because there's not really anything for you." In both cases, participants identified how institutional support for fostering autistic spaces on campus could be particularly helpful in autistic students' friendship development.

Practicing autistic authenticity

Autistic college students, much like their neurotypical peers, aimed to weed out unsupportive individuals and prioritize peers who lent support, reassurance, and kindness. Often this support surfaced when participants felt like they could unmask and openly discuss their diagnoses and experiences with caring peers who honored their identities and different needs. Therefore, in developing social connectedness, which could manifest into forming meaningful friendships, autistic college students realized the power of living their truth in settings where increasingly peers would demonstrate greater understanding and relatability.

Throughout autistic students' college journeys, determining to what extent they could openly share about their autistic identities considerably ranged. For some, like Parker, context of in-person versus online courses invariably altered if they would feel the need to mask or not:

> I feel like I have to mask more in public because I feel like a lot of people on my campus aren't really too aware about people with autism or people who are neurodivergent. . . I feel like I have to mask more because I'm afraid of how people will treat me if I don't . . . I don't feel ashamed of having autism or anything. But I feel like if people heard that label or understood that I labeled that as myself, they wouldn't take it the right way, if that makes sense. I feel like most people now still kind of have negative thoughts associated with autism.

Whereas in Parker's case classroom modality influenced disclosure, Mavis explained how their class situation and interest in autism led them to dedicate a capstone project and presentation around autistic people in higher education. Peers expressed their appreciation for Mavis' disclosure, who felt the experience was meaningful because they felt "seen with [their] struggles and experiences . . . that has gone toward me developing an autistic sense of self." Comfortable settings enabled autistic students to embrace their voices, sometimes literally on stage, and connect with peers in significant ways. Summer said how participating in musical theater helped them her realize that nothing bad would happen if people paid attention to her. Now Summer felt at ease participating in class. Transparency can be transformative for students, as Trees shared: "I feel like my friendships have been like the most authentic that they've ever been since I've gone to college because I've been intentionally unmasking . . . the more authentic in myself that I become, the stronger that my relationships become." Fellow student participants echoed similar sentiments.

At times living more authentically required autistic students to feel like they could make a leap and engage in activities where their vulnerabilities and differences materialized more evidently. Such opportunities, while uncomfortable and to some extent revealing ways in which they could be othered, also unveiled who would serve as true friends. Mavis shared how, with their hand-eye motor deficiencies, they experienced trepidation when their friends took them to a bar to play pool. Peers exhibited patience, reassuring Mavis, who had a "really good time even though I was super anxious to embarrass myself in front of people that I don't know." Similarly, Taylor shared how the social expectations of college, such as attending parties, provided discomfort at times, yet she ultimately surrounded herself with friends who "are all very understanding are like, 'yeah, take care of yourself,'" when overwhelmed.

On one hand stress could prompt some autistic students to take healthy risks and engage in opportunities that could support social connectedness, whereas in other contexts it felt like too much and would instigate retreating. This subtheme of making and maintaining friendships as relieving some stress, yet also as a counternarrative producing further stress, illustrates the complexities of practicing autistic authenticity: it could yield rewards and self-satisfaction in the right circumstances, but also feel draining and occasionally disappointing.

Bonding over shared interests

Social connectedness also stems from participating in spaces where autistic individuals have strong passions, whether via playing strategy games like Dungeons & Dragons (e.g., Kimberly, Jeremy), talking about artists like Taylor Swift (Evyn, who "was in her top 0.05% of Spotify listeners this year"), or engaging in the campus' film society (Peter), to name a few examples. Students, whether autistic or neurotypical, may find bonding over shared interests and passions as an avenue toward developing a sense of belonging; 39/43 participants reported involvement in either campus-based clubs or a form of community involvement. Some participants continued a high school sport or extracurricular activity in college, while others developed interests by joining a multitude of campus sponsored clubs and student organizations.

A few participants developed their own clubs because the college did not have offerings that were of interest to them. Hope created a disability club and reported the "awesome experience of connecting with people with similar mind-sets." Similarly, Lindsay started a fiber arts circle focusing on knitting, crocheting and other textile arts and Evyn created an American Sign Language club. Hope's positive feelings associated with linking up with a group on campus echoed another respondent, Alice, who described her book club

participation as it "felt like coming home," and Mavis shared the vitality of relatability:

> Finally seeing people and making these connections with people who have similar interests, similar humors, similar mindset, . . . has made me feel more important in the grand scheme of things

In addition to clubs developed by students, some colleges offered ASPs and affinity spaces for minoritized groups. Parker noted the benefit of connecting to friends in their autism club as "a huge part in . . . helping me . . . find my, my voice, my identity here on campus, feeling like I belong a part of the community." Bones volunteered at the disabled student center and facilitated two identity groups because they valued the space that the club provided for students. Participants listed the benefits of dedicated identity and disability spaces, including: the structure and time dedicated toward socializing (Judy, accessibility studies club), meeting like-minded friends outside their major (Elizabeth, autistic student club), and deepening a sense of self (Gien, Native American student club). By leaning into their varied identities, participants found opportunities for advocacy, connection, and community.

Online engagement and nature also offered space for participants to organically form meaningful relationships with their peers. Orange explained that an online cosplay group during freshman year gave him confidence; he further noted that he had many friendships because of online fandom spaces, and his involvement brought him "a lot of joy." Astraea used an online community platform for a class photography project and unexpectedly developed a friendship with one of the respondents. Similarly, looking beyond the campus provided the "chill vibe" of nature, as described by Gien, setting the scene for hiking, biking, and camping. Involvement in one activity often led to other outlets. For example, Parker taught their coworkers how to skateboard, which led to playing basketball with them and then plans to go fishing. Jeremy spoke about "going outwards in places that I never would've expected," a comment that other participants echoed with finding kinship in unanticipated situations.

Bonding over shared interests was also reported around employment. Astraea worked an on-campus job in the Esports department and mentioned that the job itself provided a way to engage with others who liked gaming. Frequent participants mentioned how their coworkers turned into friends, such as Worms, who reported that their on-campus parking patroller job was the best place they ever worked due to the coworkers' kindness. They went on to explain that their colleagues were receptive and open to learning about their disability, and they ended up becoming friends with many of them. For others, colleagues and managers began to feel like family; such was the case with Evyn's off-campus photography job.

As participants gathered to engage in varied activities, meaningful relationships developed. Amber met her current girlfriend through Ultimate Frisbee. Worms bonded with their best friend over a festival in town and Mavis commented it was so nice to be supported by a group of friends with whom they could try new activities, like pool. These shared interests were not always structured, scheduled events; participants spoke of casual, "recurring hangouts" to play video games (Dwayne) or "cat playdates" (Worms). Lindsay shared the meaning in having even one person to go to coffee with who will "actually care about the topic or care about doing the thing with you." Sometimes bonds form through autistic students exhibiting their passions to other people. For John, encouraging friends to lean into photography has been rewarding: "sharing something that people can be creative in and have a creative outlook . . . [has been] amazing for me." In this way, connectedness derived from other people leaning into autistic students' passions and finding them meaningful, too.

Discussion

Our study extends new perspectives about how autistic students cultivate friendship, a core pillar to the campus experience for many students, which has received remarkably minimal attention in the scholarship (for exceptions, see Bailey et al., 2020; Crompton et al., 2020) despite the elevation of calls for more college autism acceptance (Wilson & Dallman, 2024). In particular, we surface how a combination of forces that facilitate friendship among neurotypical people—among them, participating in affinity spaces and finding people with like-minded interests—are also applicable to autistic people. Yet where we perceive nuance is in *how* autistic people handle this process, especially as evidenced in the theme around autistic authenticity. Toward that end, we aim to show that transferable elements of fostering social connectedness work across the autistic community to neurotypical spaces, and in the same breath, there is value in knowing the distinctions that support friendship development among autistic college students.

Most notably unique is in the idea around practicing autistic authenticity, a theme we highlighted to reveal the vulnerability and candor that autistic people demonstrate to live more authentically. This type of authenticity is not unlike the unmasking that people in the LGBTQ + community practice around their social identities (Garvey et al., 2019). Whereas some marginalized communities have no choice but to wear their identities on their sleeves based on apparency (e.g., race), people in the autism community may have the distinct opportunity to vacillate between masking and unmasking their disabled identity (Nachman, 2023, Pearson & Rose, 2021).

Unmasking does not come without risks for autistic people, such as rejection and stigmatization (Brake, 2024; Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020), as well

as threats to well-being (e.g., anxiety, fatigue, burnout). Yet, participants often felt that embracing truth and disclosing diagnoses with new friends could strengthen peer understanding and acceptance, similar to what existent work has indicated (Romualdez et al., 2021). Much like what Vaccaro et al. (2015) model suggests, engaging in self-advocacy can facilitate belongingness. Indeed, our study participants acted with agency in bravely sharing their identities with others, not knowing how they may respond. As Mavis' examples indicated, whether in explicitly making the class aware of their autism by virtue of the capstone project topic or more unintentionally in showcasing some autism-related traits associated with hand-eye coordination while playing pool, once their peers knew about their autism, they were more empathetic. And in that process Mavis felt these experiences allowed for more bonding to occur. Trees' quote about friendships being "the most authentic that they've ever been" through unmasking epitomized how disclosure could produce positivity. What complicates these concepts around how unmasking can facilitate friendships, however, is in the limited examples around where disclosure compromises existent relationships (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2019).

This study's findings seem to suggest disclosure is often a facilitator of autistic students' friendship development, though the power rests in the autistic person regarding to what extent and with whom they share this information, as well as with neurotypical peers who determine whether to be accepting when an autistic friend discloses. Clearly more comfort in embracing autism rests in engaging in autistic spaces, as those who had access to their college's ASP exhibited. Until now most understandings of ASPs have been limited to individual studies of programs (Mapes & Cavell, 2023Nachman, 2023; Pionke et al., 2019), though our study explores how, at a national level, these programs consistently offer space for students with shared identities to connect and, at times, even form friendships. Although not all autistic people find connection over their shared disabled identities in ASPs (Nachman, 2023), as study participants indicated here, fellow autistic students could offer affirmation and even comfort to their peers making sense of their diagnosis. For some autistic students, connections with fellow autistic peers were formed through ASP involvement. For others, these connections formed organically as autistic students were naturally drawn to one another. As Vaccaro et al. (2015) shared how belongingness also stemmed from the "mastery" of fitting in, so too did students here when they received sentiments of respect and appreciation from their neurotypical peers, such as when Taylor expressed appreciation over neurotypical friends who were patient when she felt overwhelmed.

Autistic college students found friendships through various channels, often by identifying campus opportunities aligned with their passions, similar to how all students form social connections (see Hudson et al., 2023). What separates our work, and reinforces the distinctions in the autism community

in making friendships, is in the mechanisms that facilitate friendships and what autistic people tend to bond over. When student organizations lacked focal points that interested them, autistic people created their own spaces related to more niche topics like fiber arts. Other times, they joined clubs illustrative of interests common in autistic spaces like Dungeons & Dragons, known for their efficacy in modeling social dynamics in a controlled manner (Atherton et al., 2024). Alternatively, autistic people turned to online spaces for relating over distinct types of fandom and not needing to conform to the challenges sometimes associated with in-person, real-time social communication (see Leyman, 2022;). Finding friendships does not follow one common vehicle or type, and autistic college students leaned into a variety of channels to locate people just like them while, at times, pinpointing specific opportunities already existent on campus that aligned with their passions.

Notably, our study reaffirms and broadens the scope of Vaccaro et al. (2015) work by expanding across one point in time—not just transitions into college, but also across many stages of the undergraduate period—and exploring more of a national sample. Participants emphasized the importance of bonding over shared interests that happened organically over time, thereby suggesting that meaningful friendships may form as students become more settled in their college environments beyond the initial transition alone. Along these lines, we build on Vaccaro et al. (2015) work by looping in additional dimensions that support friendship development that take time beyond what the initial transition to college alone can afford: modality (per the frequency of students solidifying bonds over digital platforms), demonstrating vulnerability as one becomes more comfortable with their peers and begins to unmask, and organically finding or creating niche outlets for befriending others.

This study further expands on Vaccaro et al. (2015) model through its insight on when joining identity-affirming groups may be most helpful for autistic students. In particular, participants like Wren emphasized the need for such a community at the time of diagnosis. While this finding does not negate the need for student exposure to such identity-affirming spaces during the transition to college, it illustrates how the utility of autistic spaces might expand across the entire college span depending on when a student is diagnosed. This focus on diagnosis timing distinguishes disability-related identity groups from similar groups focused on other identities (e.g., campus counterspaces; Keels, 2020) and offers important implications when considering the value of disability-based spaces beyond the transition to college.

Implications for practice

Previous scholarship notes the benefits of participation in college clubs and organizations (Foubert & Urbanski, 2006) and our findings demonstrated that autistic students used clubs as a means for developing friendships. We

recommend that, in addition to colleges providing robust offerings (e.g., sports, film, government, drama, nature, gaming clubs), the offices of student affairs or student life advertise clubs in a variety of ways. Club fairs hosted at the beginning of each semester can be overwhelming for those autistic students with sensory sensitivities and varied communication styles. Providing club information in different formats (via search function on college websites, links to clubs' social media pages, virtual drop-in hours for questions, etc.) could be useful to autistic students who are hesitant or unable to attend large college events. In the third theme, some participants described the need to start their own clubs due to limited options on their campus. Based on these findings, we suggest that the offices overseeing clubs develop a "how to" guide for understanding the timeline and tasks involved in creating a club. Additionally, having a staff member to direct questions to during these multi-stepped processes would prove useful if students hit a barrier. Along with these guides, we further contend that student life offices should evaluate the accessibility of processes for starting a new club on campus (e.g., the number of signatures required to start a new organization). By working to reduce or eliminate barriers in the process of starting clubs, these offices might act in the spirit of the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013) by contributing to college environments that support and empower disabled students.

Our study finds that students may develop meaningful friends in college through bonding over shared interests and engaging in autistic spaces; supporting these interests through targeted campus housing opportunities could lead to positive academic and social outcomes. We see merit in residence life offices offering Living-Learning Communities (LLCs), also referred to as Residential Learning Communities (RLCs), as a housing possibility. These LLCs are designed for students to live with others who share common interests, values, hobbies, and career pursuits. Some LLCs have even been designed for neurodivergent people in mind, as in the case of Drexel ("Living Learning Communities," n.d.) and Appalachian State ("Exploring Autism and Neurodiversity," n.d.). LLCs have a positive impact on students' academic performance and overall experience in college, with benefits including a sense of community and belonging (Anderson & Blankenberger, 2023).

Finally, our study also offers implications for neurotypical college students who want to be allies to their autistic peers. Participants like Trees shared how important unmasking was for their overall well-being, while participants like Taylor described how helpful it could be to have neurotypical friends who understood her unique needs and were there to support her. Much of the current research on autistic college students focuses on what these students themselves can do to improve their social experiences (e.g., Crompton et al., 2020; Locke et al., 2024; Thompson-Hodgetts et al., 2020). Our findings,

however, support Frost et al. (2019) call for more autism acceptance efforts to be placed on neurotypical students who want to support their autistic peers. Through targeted opportunities for allies to learn about autism and potential useful supports (e.g., through taking part in campus counterspaces that welcome both autistic individuals and allies, as is consistent with Keels' 2020 campus counterspace model), neurotypical students may be able to remove some of the burden of education from their autistic peers.

Implications for future research

Along with implications for practitioners, this study presents multiple implications for future research. For one, this study identified several types of autistic spaces where autistic students reported engaging and building meaningful peer connections. Future research might more deeply consider how specific types of autistic spaces impact stakeholder experiences through longitudinal approaches. Recent scholarship has noted that student engagement may vary widely over the course of one's postsecondary experience, and that more longitudinal approaches that capture relational and dynamic phenomena (e.g., friendship development) can help higher education scholars better capture such phenomena with greater authenticity to students' lived experiences (Smith & Tinto, 2024). Thus, future researchers may produce meaningful insights on the value of autistic spaces over the span of students' entire collegiate experiences by employing longitudinal approaches in their work.

Furthermore, this study's findings further expand on Vaccaro et al. (2015) theoretical model. Our study confirms Vaccaro and colleagues' findings that disabled students (and in our case, autistic college students) seek the same meaningful connections as their non-disabled peers and that the transition to college can be a particularly important time for friendship development. However, our findings add to Vaccaro and colleagues' study by illustrating that autistic students' desire and effort to build friendships extends beyond the transition to college alone. Although unmasking provided great utility for students being able to form authentic connections with others, doing so required a degree of experience in potentially uncomfortable situations and a sense of wisdom regarding whether disclosure was safe and advantageous. This finding suggests a need for time and experience beyond the initial transition to college for many autistic students to feel able to practice autistic authenticity. Thus, we identify a need for future research that accounts for the full span of autistic students' college experiences rather than solely focusing attention on the initial transition to college.

Limitations

Although we contend that this study offers meaningful contributions to the higher education literature, key limitations should be addressed. First, we are

cognizant of how our self-selected survey sampling procedure may have failed to account for alternate perspectives on disclosure from students who chose to mask their autism. Second, while our study's national scope and inclusion of both two- and four-year college students allowed us to learn about autistic college student friendships on a broader scale, a more locally targeted study may have allowed us to better understand the nuances of autistic student friendships within specific contexts (e.g., friendships may be different when students commute to college versus when they live on campus).

Conclusion

For all college students, seeking belongingness represents a top priority (Scanlon et al., 2020; Strayhorn, 2018), and our study of autistic college students is no exception in showing its importance. Distinct to our work, nonetheless, is in the unique paths that autistic students take to find and secure meaningful friendships. In practicing autistic authenticity, for instance, they make themselves vulnerable so that peers can understand the nuances associated with their autism. Not unlike previous scholarship on the merits of disclosure (Frost et al., 2019; Romualdez et al., 2021), our study shows value in autistic individuals being transparent about their challenges and strengths tethered to autism, which fostered trust and appreciation among peers. Similarly, the connections forged in autistic spaces, whether formally participating in programs or organically in meeting other autistic people, offered a viable path for bonding. Ties also cemented in finding shared interests and even creating spaces, like clubs, to gather like-minded people. These concepts, albeit covered in related autism literature, have not yet been crystallized in this manner, and certainly not at a national level, thus elevating understanding around the many ways autistic college students socially connect with peers. Through these discoveries, we also see transferability to students broadly around the desire to make valuable connections based on interests and identities, thus reinforcing that although autistic individuals' ways of making friends may differ in some regards, the desire for seeking community in college is indeed universal.

Note

1. We use the term "autistic spaces" to refer to formal and informal spaces on campus designed to affirm autistic identities and ways of being (see Dinishak & Akhtar, 2024).

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Dr. Alyssa N. Rockenbach for offering feedback on this manuscript, as well as all participants for their engagement in this study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The research reported in the article was made possible (in part) by a grant from the Spencer Foundation (#202300292). The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Spencer Foundation. We also garnered funding from The FAR Fund, The Frist Center for Autism and Innovation, and the College Autism Network.

ORCID

Brett Ranon Nachman http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3066-0598
Karly B. Isaacson http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2550-6801
Bradley E. Cox http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6665-3651

Author statements

Brett Ranon Nachman is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at the University of Pittsburgh. He can be reached at bnachman@pitt.edu

Karly B. Isaacson is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Michigan State University.

Bradley E. Cox is an Associate Professor of Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education at Michigan State University.

Catherine Tobin McDermott is Director of McDermott Autism Services.

Author contributions

BRN and BEC developed the larger project and dataset related to this manuscript. BRN, KBI, BEC, and CTM collected and analyzed data. BRN, KBI, and CTM wrote the manuscript.

References

Anderson, S. G., & Blankenberger, B. (2023). Validation and living learning communities: An evaluation case study. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *25* (1), 76–100. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025120970934

Atherton, G., Hathaway, R., Visuri, I., & Cross, L. (2024). A critical hit: Dungeons and dragons as a buff for autistic people. *Autism*, *29*(2), 382–394. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613241275260

Bailey, K. M., Frost, K. M., Casagrande, K., & Ingersoll, B. (2020). The relationship between social experience and subjective well-being in autistic college students: A mixed methods study. *Autism*, *24*(5), 1081–1092. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319892457

Barnhill, G. P. (2016). Supporting students with asperger syndrome on college campuses: Current practices. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, *31*(1), 3–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357614523121

Bennett, M., Webster, A. A., Goodall, E., & Rowland, S. (2018). Establishing social inclusion the autism way: Denying the "they don't want friends" myth. In M. Bennett, A. A. Webster, E. Goodall, & S. Rowland (Eds.), *Life on the autism spectrum: Translating myths and misconceptions into positive futures* (pp. 173–193). Springer.

Black, M. H., Kuzminski, R., Wang, J., Ang, J., Lee, C., Hafidzuddin, S., & McGarry, S. (2022). Experiences of friendships for individuals on the autism spectrum: A scoping review. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *11*(1), 184–209. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-022-00332-8

Bottema-Beutel, K., Kim, S. Y., & Miele, D. B. (2019). College students' evaluations and reasoning about exclusion of students with autism and learning disability: Context and goals may matter more than contact. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *49*(1), 307–323. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3769-5

Brake, J. (2024). Between gaining acceptance and avoiding harm: Navigating stigma and its consequences among autistic individuals. *Disability & Society*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2374491

Bronkema, R. H., & Bowman, N. A. (2019). Close campus friendships and college student success. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *21*(3), 270–285. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025117704200

Catala, A., Faucher, L., & Poirier, P. (2021). Autism, epistemic injustice, and epistemic disablement: A relational account of epistemic agency. *Synthese*, *199*(3), 9013–9039. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-021-03192-7

Colaizzi, P. F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist views it. In R. Vaile & M. King (Eds.), *Existential phenomenological alternatives for psychology* (pp. 48–71). Oxford University Press.

Cox, B. E., Nachman, B. R., Taylor, J. L., Gillespie-Lynch, K., Gelbar, N., Raclaw, E., & McDermott, C. T. (2025). *[Manuscript submitted for preparation]. Michigan State University*.

Crompton, C. J., Hallett, S., Ropar, D., Flynn, E., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2020). 'I never realised everybody felt as happy as I do when I am around autistic people': A thematic analysis of autistic adults' relationships with autistic and neurotypical friends and family. *Autism*, *24*(6), 1438–1448. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320908976

Dinishak, J., & Akhtar, N. (2024). Autistic space: Definition and history. In G. Bennett & E. Goodall (Eds.), *The palgrave encyclopedia of disability* (pp. 1–4). Springer Nature.

Douglas, H. (2022). Sampling techniques for qualitative research. In M. R. Islam, N. A. Khan, & R. Baikady (Eds.), *Principles of social research methodology* (pp. 415–426). Springer Nature.

Englander, M. (2012). The interview: Data collection in descriptive phenomenological human scientific research. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, *43*(1), 13–35. https://doi.org/10.1163/156916212X632943

"Exploring autism and Neurodiversit" (n.d.). Appalachian State University. https://housing.appstate.edu/pagesmith/142

Finke, E. H., McCarthy, J. H., & Sarver, N. A. (2019). Self-perception of friendship style: Young adults with and without autism spectrum disorder. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, *4*, 2396941519855390. https://doi.org/10.1177/2396941519855390

Foubert, J. D., & Urbanski, L. A. (2006). Effects of involvement in clubs and organizations on the psychosocial development of first-year and senior college students. *NASPA Journal*, *43*(1), 166–182. https://doi.org/10.2202/1949-6605.1576

Frost, K. M., Bailey, K. M., & Ingersoll, B. R. (2019). "I just want them to see me as . . . me": Identity, community, and disclosure practices among college students on the autism spectrum. *Autism in Adulthood*, *1*(4), 268–275. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2018.0057

Garvey, J. C., Mobley, S. D., Jr., Summerville, K. S., & Moore, G. T. (2019). Queer and trans* students of color: Navigating identity disclosure and college contexts. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *90*(1), 150–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2018.1449081

Giorgi, A. (1985). *Phenomenology and psychological research*. Duquesne University Press.

Glass, C. R., & Gesing, P. (2018). The development of social capital through international students' involvement in campus organizations. *Journal of International Students*, *8*(3), 1274–1292. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i3.52

Griffin, W. B. (2019). Peer perceptions of students with autism spectrum disorders. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, *34*(3), 183–192. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357618800035

Hudson, T. D., Rockenbach, A. N., & Mayhew, M. J. (2023). Campus conditions and college experiences that facilitate friendship across worldview differences. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *94*(2), 227–255. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2022.2082785

Keels, M. (2020). *Campus counterspaces: Black and latinx students' search for community at historically white universities*. Cornell University Press.

Kim, S. Y., LaPoint, S., & Bottema-Beutel, K. (2024). Autistic undergraduates' experiences and intentions to persist in college. *Journal of College Student Development*, *65*(6), 663–683. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2024.a944813

Leyman, A. (2022). Use of digital platforms by autistic children and young people for creative dress-up play (cosplay) to facilitate and support social interaction. *Digital Geography and Society*, *3*, 100039. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.diggeo.2022.100039

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

"Living Learning Communitie" (n.d.). *Drexel*. https://drexel.edu/studentlife/campus-living/housing/communities/living-learning-speciality-housing/living-learning

Locke, J., Osuna, A., Myrvold, R. J., & Closson, J. S. (2024). Supporting autistic college students: Examining the mentoring, organization and social support for autism inclusion on campus (MOSSAIC) program. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *54*(6), 2094–2107. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-023-05969-w

Madsen, S. E., Jeong, E. G., & Alleman, N. F. (2023). *Exploring racial solidarity within and across ethnic college student organizations*. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000534

Mapes, A. R., & Cavell, T. A. (2023). Students enrolled in a college autism support program: Comparisons with non-enrollees and use of program-sponsored mentoring. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, *31*(1), 143–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2023.2164990

McCabe, J. M. (2019). *Connecting in college: How friendship networks matter for academic and social success*. University of Chicago Press.

Moral, E., Huete, A., & Díez, E. (2024). #mecripple: Ableism, microaggressions, and counter-spaces on twitter in Spain. *Disability & Society*, *39*(7), 1782–1799. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2022.2161348

Müller, E., Schuler, A., & Yates, G. B. (2008). Social challenges and supports from the perspective of individuals with asperger syndrome and other autism spectrum disabilities. *Autism*, *12*(2), 173–190. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361307086664

Myrvold, R., Kang-Yi, K., Frederick, K., Nehilla, L., Schoffer Closson, J., & Locke, J. (2021). Understanding the experiences of autistic college students: An exploratory mixed-methods analysis. *International Journal of Autism & Related Disabilities*, *54*, 1–11.

Nachman, B. R. (2023). "It's like you're a jockey riding a horse and you're in a world of centaurs": Unmasking autistic college students' identity development. *Journal of College Student Development*, *64*(4), 407–422. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2023.a907339

Nachman, B. R., McDermott, C. T., & Cox, B. E. (2022). Autism-specific college support programs: Differences across geography and institutional type. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *52*(2), 863–870. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-021-04958-1

Nicolaidis, C., Raymaker, D., Kapp, S. K., Baggs, A., Ashkenazy, E., McDonald, K., & Joyce, A. (2019). The AASPIRE practice-based guidelines for the inclusion of autistic adults in research as co-researchers and study participants. *Autism*, *23*(8), 2007–2019. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361319830523

O'Connor, C., & Joffe, H. (2020). Intercoder reliability in qualitative research: Debates and practical guidelines. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919899220

Oliver, M. (2013). The social model of disability: Thirty years on. *Disability & Society*, *28*(7), 1024–1026. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2013.818773

Patterson, S. E., Madsen, S. E., & Alleman, N. F. (2022). Exploring ideologically diverse friend groups among college students at a christian university. *Christian Higher Education*, *23*(3), 270–291. https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2022.2127430

Pearson, A., & Rose, K. (2021). A conceptual analysis of autistic masking: Understanding the narrative of stigma and the illusion of choice. *Autism in Adulthood*, *3*(1), 52–60. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0043

Pionke, J. J., Knight-Davis, S., & Brantley, J. S. (2019). Library involvement in an autism support program: A case study. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, *26*(3), 221–233. https://doi.org/10.1080/10691316.2019.1668896

Price, D. (2022). *Unmasking autism: Discovering the new faces of neurodiversity*. Harmony.

Romualdez, A. M., Heasman, B., Walker, Z., Davies, J., & Remington, A. (2021). "People might understand me better": Diagnostic disclosure experiences of autistic individuals in the workplace. *Autism in Adulthood*, *3*(2), 157–167. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2020.0063

Rudy, L. J. (2023, August 15). *Are autistic people introverts?*. Verywell Health. https://www.verywellhealth.com/are-autistic-people-introverts-4691154

Salinas, C., Jr., Gillon, K. E., & Camacho, T. (2019). Reproduction of oppression through fraternity and sorority recruitment and socialization. *New Directions for Student Services*, *2019*(165), 29–38. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20291

Sasson, N. J., Faso, D. J., Nugent, J., Lovell, S., Kennedy, D. P., & Grossman, R. B. (2017). Neurotypical peers are less willing to interact with those with autism based on thin slice judgments. *Scientific Reports*, *7*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1038/srep40700

Scanlon, M., Leahy, P., Jenkinson, H., & Powell, F. (2020). 'My biggest fear was whether or not I would make friends': Working-class students' reflections on their transition to university in Ireland. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *44*(6), 753–765. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1597030

Sedgewick, F., Hill, V., & Pellicano, E. (2018). Parent perspectives on autistic girls' friendships and futures. *Autism & Developmental Language Impairments*, *3*, 3. https://doi.org/10.1177/2396941518794497

Smith, R. A., & Tinto, V. (2024). Unraveling student engagement: Exploring its relational and longitudinal character. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *26*(2), 528–543. https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251221098172

Sosnowy, C., Silverman, C., Shattuck, P., & Garfield, T. (2019). Setbacks and successes: How young adults on the autism spectrum seek friendship. *Autism in Adulthood*, *1*(1), 44–51. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2018.0009

Stockwell, K. M., Bottini, S., Jaswal, V. K., & Gillis, J. M. (2021). Brief report: Social behavior and special interests in the stigmatization of autistic college students. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *51*(9), 3356–3364. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04769-w

Strayhorn, T. L. (2018). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.

Thompson-Hodgetts, S., Labonte, C., Mazumder, R., & Phelan, S. (2020). Helpful or harmful? A scoping review of perceptions and outcomes of autism diagnostic disclosure to others. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, *77*, 101598. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2020.101598

Vaccaro, A., Daly-Cano, M., & Newman, B. M. (2015). A sense of belonging among college students with disabilities: An emergent theoretical model. *Journal of College Student Development*, *56*(7), 670–686. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2015.0072

Vagle, M. D. (2009). Validity as intended: 'bursting forth toward' bridling in phenomenological research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *22*(5), 585–605. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390903048784

Waisman, T. C., Williams, Z. J., Cage, E., Santhanam, S. P., Magiati, I., Dwyer, P., & Gillespie-Lynch, K. (2023). Learning from the experts: Evaluating a participatory autism and universal design training for university educators. *Autism*, *27*(2), 356–370. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221097207

Weir, E., Allison, C., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2021). The sexual health, orientation, and activity of autistic adolescents and adults. *Autism Research*, *14*(11), 2342–2354. https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2604

Willingham, A. J. (2024, March 4). *'Love on the spectrum' reveals the challenges of autism representation*. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/04/entertainment/love-on-the-spectrum-adult-autism-representation-cec/index.html

Wilson, K., & Dallman, A. (2024). *Strategies for promoting neurodiversity and autism acceptance in higher education*. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000550

Yang, C. C. (2022). Similar patterns, different implications: First-generation and continuing college students' social media use and its association with college social adjustment. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *24*(1), 79–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025120902755