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# Transitions, Adjustments, and Persistence: Autistic Undergraduates Navigating Higher Education

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# Author Introductions

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# Background

Research in Developmental Disabilities 113 (2021) 103956



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Research in Developmental Disabilities

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/rdevdis](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/rdevdis)

## Understanding perceptions and experiences of autistic undergraduate students toward disability support offices of their higher education institutions

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### ARTICLE INFO

Number of reviews completed is 2

**Keywords:**  
Autism spectrum disorders  
Higher education  
College student  
Disability support office  
Post-secondary  
Interview

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Autistic undergraduate students are experiencing considerable difficulties on college campuses. Yet, disability support offices (DSOs), which assume the role of providing support to students with disabilities, often lack the resources to cater to the needs of autistic students.

**Aim:** To understand autistic students' perspectives and experiences with DSOs and support services available from DSOs of higher education institutions in the United States.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews with 27 autistic undergraduate students were conducted to solicit their perceptions about their DSOs. A generic inductive approach was used to analyze the participants' responses.

**Results:** Students expressed both positive and negative experiences with academic support, and perceived that DSO staff lacked specific autism knowledge and resources. Some students initially decided not to receive DSO accommodations but chose to reach out to their DSOs after experiencing academic difficulties. Finally, perceptions of ways for DSOs to support them better highlighted the need for institutions to make a cultural shift about disability and acceptance and the need for more services.

**Conclusions:** Appropriate resources for DSOs and institution-wide efforts are needed to make college campuses both physically and emotionally accessible to autistic students.

Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders 89 (2021) 101883



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/raad](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/raad)

## Autistic undergraduate students' transition and adjustment to higher education institutions

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### ARTICLE INFO

Number of reviews completed is 2

**Keywords:**  
Autism  
Postsecondary  
Special education  
Transition  
Adjustment  
Higher education

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Only a limited number of studies have specifically examined autistic undergraduate students' perspectives on transition. Positive experiences during the initial transition from high school to college lead to long-term success in college.

**Method:** This study examined the transition and adjustment experiences of 27 autistic undergraduate students attending higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

**Results:** The majority (66.7%) of participants described the transition experience in terms of difficulties. They also reported that geographical proximity to home and family support, social relationships, transition programs, structural changes from their high school experiences, and academic difficulties were important aspects of their transition experiences during the first months of HEI. All participants indicated they felt adjusted to college life at the time of the interview, and adjustment was facilitated by familiarity with campus routines, academic achievement, and positive social experiences.

**Conclusions:** Themes associated with autistic students' transition and adjustment experiences should be followed up in future quantitative research. Careful transition planning that includes autistic students about expectations associated with HEI, familiarizes them with college life, and helps them gain practical skills needed in colleges (e.g., transportation), and helps them find a balance between parental support and independence is needed to support autistic students during transition and adjustment.

International Research Dr. Ebelia Hernandez, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

## Autistic Undergraduates' Experiences and Intentions to Persist in College

So Yoon Kim Shannon LaPoint Kristen Bottema-Beutel

*This study examined autistic undergraduate students' college experiences and their perceptions about their intentions to persist in college. Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with 27 autistic undergraduate students (mean age = 21.8 years; 40.7% men), and their responses were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Students discussed their perspectives about revealing their autism diagnosis, the value of the social community or lack thereof, the process of getting accommodations from professors, and autism acceptance on campus. Students perceived that their intentions to persist in college were related to their desire to learn, the practical utility of a college degree, the symbolic value of a degree, and the value placed on education by their families.*

Despite the increase in autistic students entering university settings (Bakker et al., 2019),

many autistic students face challenges and difficulties in college because of a stigmatized setting and structural barriers to their success.

disabilities by asking them to conform to pre-established norms that were not developed with disabled people in mind rather than trying to change the social environment to accommodate their needs (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021). This failure to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities leads to reduced graduation rates and retention of undergraduate students with disabilities (Dolmage, 2017).

However, autistic undergraduate students have also emphasized that they can have successful college experiences when provided with appropriate accommodations (Van Bergeijk et al., 2008; Wei et al., 2014). To better support autistic undergraduate students in achieving their higher education goals, it is important to understand their college experiences and identify factors that may influence their feelings of success or disappointment. This study was

So Yoon Kim, Shannon LaPoint, Kristen Bottema-Beutel

Journal of College Student Development, Volume 65, Number 6, November-December 2024, pp. 663-683 (Article)  
Education Institutions

One dataset collected in 2019 as a part of SYK's dissertation



# Background

The image displays three overlapping journal article covers. The leftmost cover is from 'Research in Developmental Disabilities' (Volume 113, 2021, 103966) and features the article 'Understanding perceptions and experiences of autistic undergraduate students toward disability support offices of their higher education institutions' by So Yoon Kim and Shannon Crowley. The middle cover is from 'Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders' (Volume 89, 2021, 101883) and features the article 'Autistic undergraduate students' transition and adjustment to higher education institutions' by So Yoon Kim, Shannon Crowley, and Kristen Bottema-Beutel. The rightmost cover is from 'International Research' (Volume 65, Number 6, November-December 2024, pp. 663-683) and features the article 'Autistic Undergraduates' Experiences and Intentions to Persist in College' by So Yoon Kim, Shannon LaPoint, and Kristen Bottema-Beutel. A red border highlights the middle and right covers.

Experiences about disability support offices

Transition and adjustment

Intentions to persist

# Contexts

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As institutional support for special education is declining in many U.S. contexts, what can be still done at the department, faculty, and researcher level to implement the types of supports identified in this study?

# Background

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- Prior research has shown that autistic students often encounter significant challenges in higher education (Alverson et al., 2019; Anderson & Butt, 2017; Hillier et al., 2018).
- Studies have identified multiple factors influencing both positive (e.g., self-determination, advocacy skills, accommodations from disability support offices) and negative experiences (e.g., disclosing diagnosis, social difficulties) (Kim & LaPoint, 2021; Cai & Richdale, 2016; Van Hees et al., 2015)
- However, little is known about how these unfold across specific stages of the college journey.
- Therefore, we focus on transition, adjustment, and persistence, recognizing that different types of support may be needed at **each phase** to help students succeed in their college experience.

# Background: Transition

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- **Conceptualized as** the move into higher education, changing routine, relationships, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg, 1984).
- **Stressful period:** Autistic students experience similar transition stress as peers (Alverson et al., 2019; Anderson & Butt, 2017; Gurbuz et al., 2019).
- **Emerging adulthood:** Brings increased expectations for independence and responsibility (Arnett, 2004).
- **Focus of research:** College preparation and first-year experience, as most dropouts occur in the first year (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007; Heublein et al., 2017; Tinto, 1982).




# Background: Adjustment

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- **Conceptualized as** students' internal sense of managing the higher education context (Hurtado et al., 2007).
- **Baczewski et al. (2021):** Autistic first-year students showed similar adjustment to peers with ADHD and without diagnoses. Social confidence and ease of making friends supported positive adjustment across all groups.
- **Gap:** Limited research specifically focused on adjustment in autistic students.

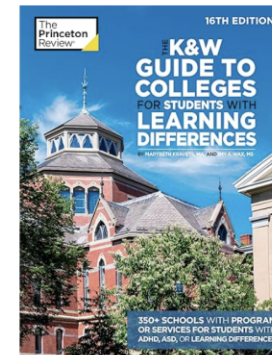
# Background: Intention to Persist

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- **Conceptualized as:** expressed commitment to continue enrollment (Beadlescomb, 2019).
  - **Autistic students:** Report social and academic barriers contributing to negative experiences and dropout (Cage & Howes, 2020; Wei et al., 2014).
  - **Proxy measure:** Intent to persist often used as a proxy for actual persistence (Bean, 1980; Braxton et al., 1997).
  - **Evidence base:** Strong associations between intent and persistence (Barnett, 2011; Cabrera et al., 1993); supported by the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985).
-   
a person's behavior is primarily predicted by  
their intention to perform it
- **Predictors:** Academic satisfaction and social integration significantly predict intent to persist among students with learning disabilities (DaDeppo, 2009).

# Methods: Participants

- Institutions with varying levels of disability support
  - 30 institutions from each tier of the *K&W Guide* (Kravets & Wax, 2019)
  - Specifically targeted community colleges
- Multiple recruitment sources:
  - DSOs & student affairs offices (~100 colleges contacted)
  - Flyers posted on campuses
  - Outreach through autism-specific organizations (e.g., AANE) and colleagues
- Final sample: 26 autistic undergraduates from 15 U.S. 4-year institutions



비디오

The K&W Guide to Colleges for Students with Learning Differences, 16th Edition: 350+ Schools with Programs or Services for Students with ADHD, ASD, or Learning Differences (College Admissions Guides) 16번째

에디션

기준 The Princeton Review (Author), Marybeth Kravets (Author), & 1 추가

3.6 ★★★★★ ∨ 23개의 평가

**FIND THE RIGHT SCHOOL FOR YOUR SPECIFIC NEEDS.** This indispensable resource will help students with ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, or learning differences find and apply to their personal best-fit college.

Hundreds of thousands of students with learning differences head to college every year. This comprehensive guide makes it easy for those students and their

# Methods: Participants

**Table 1**  
Participant Characteristics.

Demographic Variable	Frequency (%)
Gender (Male: Female: Other)	11 (40.7) : 13 (48.1) : 3 (11.1)
Ethnicity <sup>a</sup>	
European American	21 (77.8)
African American	2 (7.4)
Asian	2 (7.4)
Other (American Indian/Hispanic)	3 (11.1)
Grade Level	
Freshman	5 (18.5)
Sophomore	4 (14.8)
Junior	7 (25.9)
Senior	9 (33.3)
Other (fifth year, leave of absence)	2 (7.4)
On Individualized Education Program in K-12	
Yes: No	16 (59.3) : 11 (40.7)
History of other developmental disabilities	12 (44.4)
ADHD	7 (25.9)
Learning disabilities	1 (3.7)
	Mean ( <i>SD</i> )
Age (years)	21.81 (4.22)

<sup>a</sup> Ethnicity categories are not mutually exclusive. ADHD = attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

# Methods: Data Collection and Analysis

## Data Collection

- Semi-structured interviews conducted online (Facetime or Zoom)
- Interview guide shared with participants in advance
- Participants could pause/resume at any time
- Average length: 46 minutes (range: 18–59 minutes)

## Data Analysis

- Approach: Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005)

### Initial Coding

Two coders independently open-coded 13 transcripts (half) to develop codes

### Subtheme Development

Grouped codes into subthemes first independently, refined through discussion

### Theme Development

Reorganized subthemes into 12 broader themes through discussion

### Iterative Refinement

Applied scheme to remaining data; Added/revise the scheme iteratively as needed

### Validation

*Member check with 2 participants*  
*Audit: 2 researchers reviewed design & findings*

In this presentation, we focus on three themes related to transition, adjustment, and persistence.

# Results: Factors Influencing Transition

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**Geographic Proximity to Home and Family Support**

**Structured Transition Programs**

**Differences between High School and College**

**Practical Issues**

**Social Relationships on Campus**

I would also say that the transition was easier because I stayed in the region. Nashville was always where my family came if we wanted to go to one of the bigger malls or go to a nice restaurant. Just already knowing the area, and having visited the area with my family made that transition easier for me than maybe for some people (P13, Female, Junior but graduating).



# Results: Factors Influencing Transition

---

**Geographic Proximity to Home and Family Support**

**Structured Transition Programs**

**Differences between High School and College**

**Practical Issues**

**Social Relationships on Campus**

There was a first semester class called Succeed [Pseudonym], and it's just one credit for an hour a week. It basically goes through the time management stuff. How to really navigate the school, like how to be able to succeed and do your best, with whatever issues you may have. That was a really good class for me. That was huge (P3, Male, Senior).

# Results: Factors Influencing Transition

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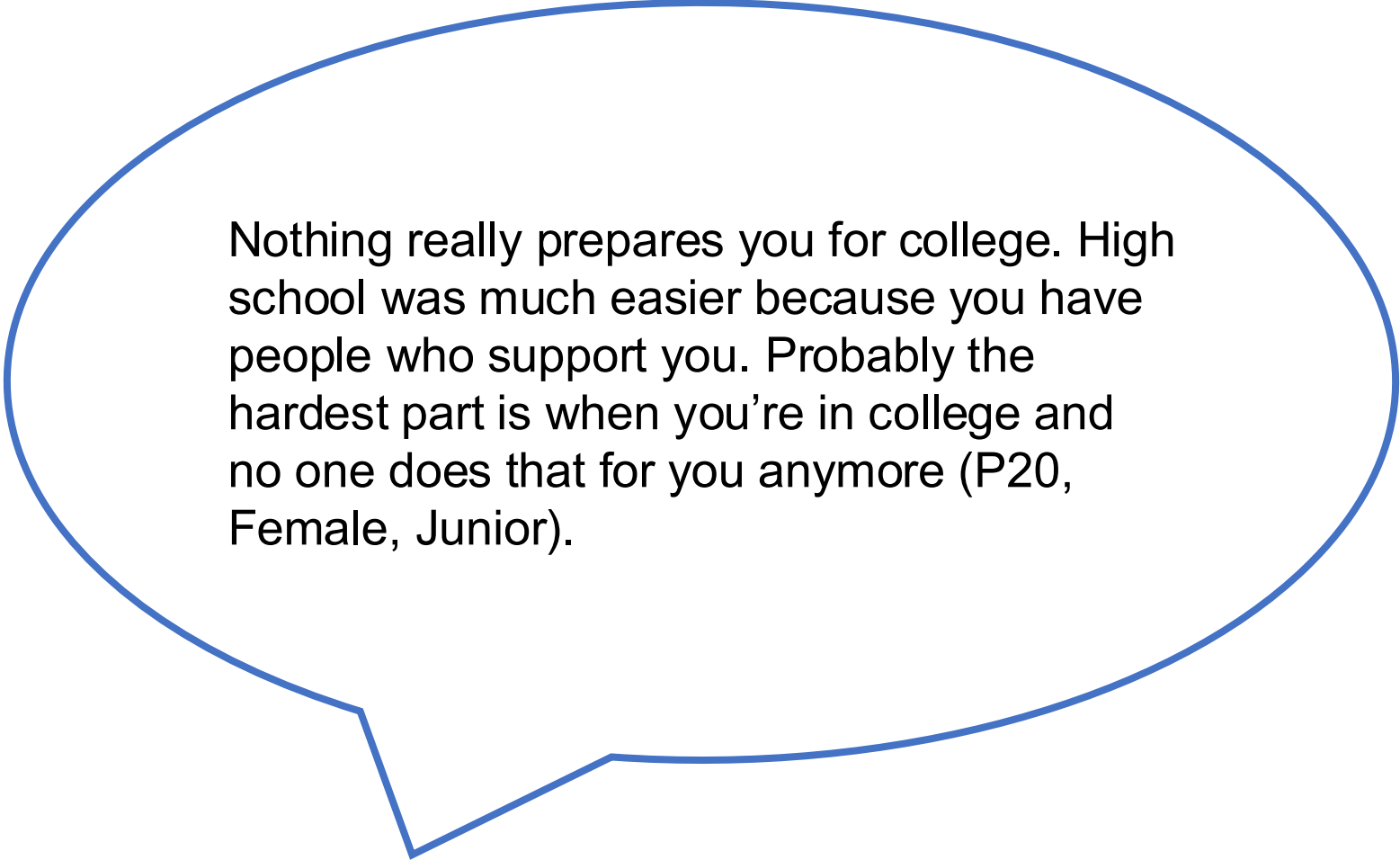
**Geographic Proximity to Home and Family Support**

**Structured Transition Programs**

**Differences between High School and College**

**Practical Issues**

**Social Relationships on Campus**



Nothing really prepares you for college. High school was much easier because you have people who support you. Probably the hardest part is when you're in college and no one does that for you anymore (P20, Female, Junior).

# Results: Factors Influencing Transition

---

**Geographic Proximity to Home and Family Support**

**Structured Transition Programs**

**Differences between High School and College**

**Practical Issues**

**Social Relationships on Campus**

**Navigating Campus:** I had to have someone help me learn which roads to take to get there and how to get to the buildings once I got there (P24, Female, Junior)  
**Housing:** I wound up having this really negative housing situation in my first few months (P12, Genderqueer, Junior but taking leave of absence)

# Results: Factors Influencing Transition

---

**Geographic Proximity to Home and Family Support**

**Structured Transition Programs**

**Differences between High School and College**

**Practical Issues**

**Social Relationships on Campus**

**Positive:** It was a pretty good transition because I had already met people through the marching band before classes started. It was easy to talk to them because we have the same interests. I already had people there. (P8, Male, Senior).

**Negative:** I'm just not that good at meeting new people. And when you are a freshman, everyone is basically friends and doing everything together and stuff. I had a pretty hard time (P27, Female, Junior).

# Results: Factors Impacting Perception of Adjustment

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**Familiarity with Routines  
on Campus**

**Academic Success**

**Engaging with Others and  
Developing Friendships**

When asked about their adjustment to college life, **all participants** indicated they feel more adjusted now than when they first started HEI.

# Results: Factors Impacting Perception of Adjustment

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**Familiarity with Routines  
on Campus**

**Academic Success**

**Engaging with Others and  
Developing Friendships**

Especially the fact that I've found a lot of comfort in the schedule and what day in day out looks like. Some people may get bored, but I find it really comforting (P10, Transgender Male, Freshman)

- Developing daily schedules and rhythms
- Building time management strategies
- Comfort derived from routine and predictability
- Campus becoming more familiar than home



# Results: Factors Impacting Perception of Adjustment

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**Familiarity with Routines  
on Campus**

**Positive Academic  
Experiences**

**Engaging with Others and  
Developing Friendships**

It also depends on what class. If you're in a class of 200, it's going to need much more time just getting one on one help from your professor. But if it's a class with 20 people, it's more doable and enjoyable (P20, Female, Junior).

- Developing realistic academic goals
- Positive professor relationships and accommodations
- Class size influencing adjustment

# Results: Factors Impacting Perception of Adjustment

**Familiarity with Routines  
on Campus**

**Positive Academic  
Experiences**

**Engaging with Others and  
Developing Friendships**

I would say that's about when I started to feel well-adjusted because I had found the community here (P13, Female, Junior but graduating).

I've adjusted to my specific college situation, but I don't feel that I've had the college experience other people have, like going to parties, meeting people. I'm comfortable with the system that I've had going for my college experience (P14, Female, Senior).

- Developing friendships and sense of community
- Adjusting without traditional "college experience" (parties, large social groups)

# Results: Persistence

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**Desire to Learn**

**Practical Utility of the  
College Degree**

**Feelings of  
Accomplishment**

**Family Values About  
College Degree**

I've always loved the idea of being able to have some sort of specialized education that's really geared toward what you want to do with your life. But like being able to really learn about what you want to do (Iris, woman, junior, White)

# Results: Persistence

---

**Desire to Learn**

**Practical Utility of the  
College Degree**

**Feelings of  
Accomplishment**

**Family Values About  
College Degree**

Working in cyber security, certification definitely plays a big role, but for the most part, to move up at all or get any more raises, a degree is pretty much required (Lam, man, first-year student, White).

I grew up in poverty, and that pushes me because I want to help my family advance (Umar, transgender man, first-year student, White)

# Results: Persistence

---

**Desire to Learn**

**Practical Utility of the  
College Degree**

**Feelings of  
Accomplishment**

**Family Values About  
College Degree**

Three out of four nontraditional (i.e., students who entered the postsecondary institutions late, for instance, in their 30s, were employed off-campus) mentioned, I never got to finish the first time around. I thought it would be done in like two years. I'm 38 now. So, I'm pretty persistent so I'd like to get this done. I'll get that tassel (Landon, man, junior, White).

# Results: Persistence

---

**Desire to Learn**

**Practical Utility of the  
College Degree**

**Feelings of  
Accomplishment**

**Family Values About  
College Degree**

I was raised knowing that education is the most important thing and that opens up doors for you. So as long as I know whatever I want to do, I know that I can achieve it through my education (Uri, woman, first-year student, White).



# Discussion

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- When comparing to the literature on non-autistic college students, there are similarities between autistic and non-autistic students in how they transition to, adjust to, and persist in college.
- Social relationships were not a major theme for persistence, which may reflect fewer interests in traditional social engagement or prior negative experiences during transition or K-12 experiences.
- Autistic undergraduates navigate higher education with both unique challenges (e.g., increased anxiety and stress, adaptive skills-related difficulties, social interaction) and distinctive strengths (e.g., strong intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and the formation of smaller yet tight-knit social communities)
- As challenges and influencing factors vary across phases, supports should be tailored to each stage.

# Implications for Practice

## Transition

- **Provide structured supports:** Offer transition courses and guidance on daily living skills (e.g., housing, campus navigation).
- **Bolster family and peer networks:** Encourage early peer connections, and for students without nearby family, strengthen institutional supports to reduce isolation.

## Adjustment

- **Promote stability through routines:** Help students establish daily schedules and develop time and anxiety management strategies.
- **Create supportive academic environments:** Offer opportunities for smaller classes when possible, prioritize accessible faculty, and provide clear academic guidance.
- **Validate diverse social connections:** Recognize multiple ways of belonging, whether through clubs and friendships or nontraditional pathways.

## Persistence

- **Foster multifaceted motivation:** Nurture intrinsic motivation (love of learning), highlight extrinsic utility (career opportunities)
- **Celebrate milestones:** Recognize both major and smaller achievements to reinforce commitment and reduce dropout risk.

# Implications for Practice

**Transition**

**Adjustment**

**Persistence**



- **Provide** s  
Offer tran  
guidance  
(e.g., hou  
navigation
- **Bolster f**  
**networks**  
connectio  
without n  
institution  
isolation.

**Institution-level support is the key lever:**  
Policies, programs, and proactive practices shape whether autistic students can thrive in higher education

**Institutions need proactive outreach:**  
Institutions should create accessible entry points for support.

**Faceted**  
Nurture intrinsic  
ove of learning),  
insic utility  
rtunities)  
**Milestones:**  
oth major and  
evements to  
nmitment and  
out risk.

# Limitations

## Limitations

- **Sample size and representation:** Only 26 students from 4-year U.S. institutions, with limited diversity, restricting generalizability
- **Self-selection bias:** Participants were recruited through DSOs, networks, and advocacy groups; students less connected to supports may have been underrepresented.

## Reflections in Hindsight

- **Limited methodological approach:** The study relied on qualitative interviews without a CBPR (Community-Based Participatory Research) framework, meaning autistic voices shaped data only as participants, not as co-researchers.
- **Emphasis on challenges:** The study primarily documented barriers to transition, adjustment, and persistence, with less attention to resilience and strengths.
- **Identity dimensions and intersectionality underexplored:** Limited attention to how autistic students' identities were reshaped through college experiences and how these processes intersect with other social identities.

# Implications for Future Research

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- Since this study, more research has adopted CBPR approaches, highlighted resilience and strengths (not only challenges), and expanded attention to identity and intersectionality.

## Implications for Future Research

- **Longitudinal studies:** Track autistic students across multiple years to capture evolving transition, adjustment, and persistence processes.
- **Larger, multi-institutional studies:** Broader recruitment across institutional types (e.g., community colleges, minority-serving institutions, international contexts)
- **Cross-cultural research:** Illuminate how institutional structures, and policy frameworks shape autistic students' persistence and highlight gaps between inclusive education policies and practices across national contexts.
- **Intervention research:** Develop professional development trainings that aim to educate faculty and staff members on best practices for supporting autistic college students during each phase of their college experience.

# Acknowledgement

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- We thank the autistic participants who shared their experiences in this study.
- This research was funded by the Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship at the Lynch School of Education, Boston College.
- We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

The materials presented today are drawn from:

Kim, S. Y., LaPoint, S., & Bottema-Beutel, K. (2021). Autistic undergraduate students' transition and adjustment to higher education institutions. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 89(3), 101883.

Kim, S. Y., LaPoint, S. C., & Bottema-Beutel, K. (2024). Autistic undergraduates' experiences and intentions to persist in college. *Journal of College Student Development*, 65(6), 663-683.

Thank you!

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