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SUPPORT PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM: AN
EVALUATION OF CURRENT PROGRAMMING AND COMPONENTS OFFERED
BY A POSTSECONDARY AUTISM PROGRAM

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty in the Department of Educational Administration, Leadership, and Research
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

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

By
Lisa Michelle Elkins

May 2020

SUPPORT PROGRAMMING FOR STUDENT ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM: AN
EVALUATION OF CURRENT PROGRAMMING AND COMPONENTS OFFERED BY A
POST-SECONDARY AUTISM PROGRAM

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SUPPORT PROGRAMMING FOR STUDENT ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM: AN
EVALUATION OF CURRENT PROGRAMMING AND COMPONENTS OFFERED
BY A POSTSECONDARY AUTISM PROGRAM

Michelle Elkins

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The purpose of this research was to determine how stakeholders value the current components of a Postsecondary Autism Program (PSAP). The evaluation assessed the efficacy of the program's six components and the improvements needed to ensure the desired outcomes were being achieved. A mixed-methods approach using both surveys and focus groups was used to obtain data. The surveys were administered to students who were currently enrolled in the PSAP program and parents of students who were currently enrolled. A focus group format using six questions was administered to the five full-time staff of the PSAP program.

The results of the study indicated overall satisfaction with the six components of the PSAP program. The data allowed the researcher to rank the components that were most helpful according to both students and parents. The data also revealed the stakeholders' feelings and perceptions by giving the opportunity to comment and make suggestions concerning each area of support and the program overall. The data from these sources can be used to identify areas of strength and those areas in which programming improvements can be made.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Postsecondary Autism Program (PSAP), located at a university in the southeastern United States, provides an educational, social, and supportive environment so students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can achieve their potential as independent, productive, and active community citizens. The purpose of the PSAP Circle of Support is to assist students who are diagnosed with ASD and are attending a university in the southeastern US seeking a degree to meet their academic, vocational, and individual social goals. Participants in the PSAP Circle of Support receive tutoring, mentoring, social activities, advising, mental health counseling, and an individual living environment. According to Carter, Austin, and Trainor (2012), there have been initiatives in place through policy and legislature that focus on creating opportunities that will help to guide those individuals with disabilities through the transition from school to employment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this program evaluation is to determine how the stakeholders value the current components of the PSAP. The evaluation will aid in assessing the efficacy of the program's six components and the improvements needed to ensure the desired outcomes are being achieved. Therefore, the evaluation will assist in having a better understanding of how well the current components are working to ensure optimal success for the student participants. Understanding these areas of need and areas of strength will facilitate program growth and help to benefit the Circle of Support's service delivery and student success.

Mertens and Wilson (2012) described a four-branch system to evaluation approach. This evaluation employs the use of branch theory of program evaluation, which was developed by Daniel Stufflebeam and first recognized in the program evaluation community in 1968. This theory follows a contemporary and constructivist approach and can be described as focusing mainly on the individual and his/her thoughts and experiences.

Key Research Questions

1. How do the stakeholders rate the six components of the Postsecondary Autism Program?
2. What components of the Postsecondary Autism Program do stakeholders identify as most helpful?
3. What improvements could leadership make regarding the Postsecondary Autism Program?

Significance of the Study

The research available concerning support services for students with ASD at the postsecondary level is limited. In the 13 years since the development of the PSAP, data are lacking concerning overall feelings on helpfulness and needs assessment. The research is clear that support services increase the likelihood a student who enters higher education will matriculate. Astin (1984) asserted in the Theory of Involvement that student participation and connection is paramount to success. Tinto (1993) also agreed that support for students is of utmost importance to their retention and degree completion. These theories also can be applied to students diagnosed with ASD and their continuation at an institution. This study allows the program to determine the current needs and areas

of strength. It also identifies the components that students, their parents, and full-time employees find have the most significant impact on student success.

This study may help in developing and improving the support services currently offered to students within the PSAP and could have implications for other programs within the US and beyond as they develop, improve, and become aware of needed support services. The research could improve awareness of ASD, assist in developing university policy, and improve awareness of support services being offered at the university.

Background

The transition from high school to college can be challenging, and many students lack the opportunity to continue their academic career without support. As a rule, colleges are not equipped or set up to support the student's individual and specialized needs. Students with ASD are at a much higher risk for academic failure at the postsecondary level. According to Anderson, Carter, and Stephenson (2017), students diagnosed with ASD make up approximately 1% of the student population attending postsecondary institutions. They also reported that 69% of those diagnosed with ASD have no co-morbid intellectual disability, with 46% of those individuals having average or possibly even above average intelligence. Studies have shown that these individuals have less access to services and the fewest options following secondary education than even individuals who have ASD and a co-morbid intellectual deficit. Day programs and other adult services often apply to those young adults. Conversely, those students without an intellectual impairment find themselves floundering and lost with very few educational or vocational options (Anderson et al., 2017).

Anderson et al. (2017) further indicated that graduation rates for students who were enrolled in a postsecondary program with ASD were significantly lower than their typically developing peers. The studies showed a large gap of approximately 35%, as compared to 51-67% of those without an ASD diagnosis. It is also estimated that .07% to 1.9% of college students have characteristics of or meet the criteria for ASD. The causes of this discrepancy vary widely and are very complex. Although students with ASD have a vast array of strengths ranging from, but not limited to an excellent memory, a specialized knowledge of technology, and often a very focused nature, the areas of need far supersede the areas of strength. Communication deficits/difficulties negatively impact classroom communication, especially when group assignments and presentations are involved. A need for structure and routine also can impact a student's success. Loneliness, sensory issues, anxiety, and depression often plague these individuals. Due to all of these factors, friendship development and hyper- or hyposensitivity to stimuli make completion of a degree a paramount task.

Many students have reported that academics were not a concern for them. They reported that the non-academic factors affected their success and persistence to a much higher degree (Anderson et al., 2017). The researchers also reported that the non-academic issues are the major factors that result in less effectiveness of academic supports. The majority of students in this study indicated that, although they felt confident in their academic skills and achievements, they thought they did not perform as well due to the anxiety, sleep issues, depression, lack of companionship, and need for structure. Gardiner and Iarocci (2014) stated the "...characteristic social communication

difficulties and co-morbid anxiety...present the greatest obstacles to achieving academic success” (p. 1008).

The PSAP at this university in the southeastern US created the Circle of Support, a program that offers six areas of assistance specifically designed to address the challenges faced by students with ASD and to increase their success on campus. The program consists of six areas of support including private residence hall rooms, study tables, mentoring, socials, mental health counseling, and weekly advisor meetings.

The theoretical framework for the college program is the Social Information Processing Theory and executive functioning development. According to Crick and Dodge (1994), “Social information processing theory is more broadly concerned with all of the mental operations that are deployed to generate a behavioral response during social interaction” (p. 75). Social information processing refers to the way that an individual’s behavior is shaped or determined by his/her interpretation and interaction with the environment and the world around him/her. Crick and Dodge detailed five stages to a person’s behavior or reaction to any situation. These include encoding, mental representations, response accessing, evaluation, and enactment. Encoding can be described as looking for cues in the environment to interpret. Mental representations involve using those clues to interpret and assign meaning. The physical response, whether it is actual or internal, that happens following the mental representation is a stage of response accessing. Evaluation is the fourth stage and is described as the acts of looking at the behavioral response and the expectations and outcomes. Last is the behavioral enactment stage, which describes other's reactions and evaluations of the response (Crick & Dodge, 1994). The PSAP Circle of Support uses this framework and

follows these stages to instruct and assist students as the staff processes and the student interprets and analyzes his/her behavior in social situations.

A second focus of the Circle of Support is the development of skills involving executive functioning. Executive functioning skills include working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control. The skills associated include attention skills, planning and cognitively organizing a given task, beginning and staying focused on tasks, regulation of emotion, and monitoring self and motivating to continue and complete tasks (Berenguer, Miranda, Colomer, Baixauli, & Rosello, 2018). The researchers found that executive functioning deficits negatively impact not only academic skills, but also adaptive social behaviors and pragmatic skills. The Circle of Support offers strategies and interventions to support students' executive functioning development.

The PSAP Circle of Support focuses on six major areas of support. Three of the components are not mandatory but are offered as services. Students are offered a single dorm room at the same cost of having a double occupancy room due to a partnership with the university's office of housing and residence life. Although this service is offered to all PSAP participants, students are not required to reside in an individual room. To individualize the service for student needs, those students accepted into the program decide if they will reside with a roommate or live alone in the residence hall. The second area of support offered is social activities. The PSAP provides a minimum of six socials per month that are organized and supervised by full-time staff. Students within the program must choose to attend a minimum of two planned social events per month. The social events include on- and off-campus activities and vary each month. The third component is mental health counseling support. A full-time mental health counselor is a

part of the full-time staff of the PSAP and is available only to students who are enrolled in the program. Students may choose to schedule regular therapy sessions, see the therapist as needed for crisis situations, or not be seen at all other than an initial intake meeting. As of 2019, approximately 55% of students within the program are currently being serviced through this component.

The fourth component of the PSAP Circle of Support is referred to as study tables. This component is considered mandatory to attend. Each student must attend study tables for a total of 12 hours per week. This time is generally broken down into three hour-long sessions four days per week. The schedule is consistent and predictable from week to week. During this time, students can receive tutoring, assistance with executive functioning skills (problem-solving, prioritizing, organization), and communication. Student employees of varying academic backgrounds and specialties serve as staff during the required study sessions. The students also may receive assistance during these hours from administrative staff as needed. The amount of time necessary in uninterrupted study time per credit hour is a highly debated topic. However, a lesser debated idea is that college students are ill-prepared on the average for the rigorous study changes required to be successful at the postsecondary level. Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006) stated that high school seniors reported studying six hours or less per week, which is much lower than the traditionally recognized amount needed. The average amount of study time required for each student's credit hour is between two and three hours. Therefore, each student within the PSAP must fulfill the requirement of 12 hours of mandatory guided and/or independent study hours in an effort to build healthy study skill habits.

Leidenfrost, Strassning, Schutz, Carbon, and Schabmann (2014) found in a study of mentoring programs that a high correlation exists between students who regularly interact with an assigned mentor and student academic performance. They particularly found an association between mentees and courses passed. This study indicated that mentorship programs at the higher education level could lead to improved academic performance. Mentoring is the fifth and another mandatory component of the PSAP. Each week a student attends a mentoring group. This group consists of two mentors and up to four students who attend a planned activity of their interest. These could include events such as dinner, service groups, exercise groups, art groups, or board game groups. The students who are participants in the program are required to attend one mentoring session per week for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. These sessions also are consistent week to week and can be easily predicted.

Finally, each student participant is assigned a PSAP advisor whose role is to meet with each student on a weekly basis. This meeting allows each student to receive individual attention to discuss personal matters, review Blackboard, and to what? specific assignment requirements. Blackboard is a tool that allows professors to add course resources and information for students to access online. This online tool is used by colleges and universities across the US to enhance teaching and learning. PSAP advising allows students to establish a closer relationship with one staff member to increase their communication and comfort level. These individuals also act as mentors who build a relationship to improve academic, social, emotional, and vocational skills.

Program History and Timeline

The concept of a clinical education site began in 2003 when a group of early childhood educators, who were previously employed by a local community health agency, was seeking other opportunities due to their program elimination caused by a subsequent lack of funding. At that point, a group of parents and grandparents, spearheaded by a concerned citizen, banded together to form this partnership between the local community and this university. This partnership was initially forged to fill the gap left by the closing of a local community child development group. The university president and the university provost were supportive of the idea; in fact, they added their vision to the concept and a dedicated clinical education site was on its way to becoming a reality.

The clinical education site opened its doors and was dedicated in August of 2006 and was comprised of the Communication Disorders Program, the Early Childhood Program, the Family Counseling Clinic, the Acquired Brain Injury Resource Program, and Family Resource Program. In 2007, the PSAP moved into the new space at the site. In 2008, the Early Childhood Center was named and dedicated, and the clinical education site was named for a local businesswoman and advocate. In July 2012, the current president of the local university appointed a Governing Board of Directors for the clinical education complex. For the next few years, the programs grew and developed and, as all developing organizations, had a few growing pains in the process. During that time, a strategic plan was created and focused the mission on individuals with developmental delays and disabilities, including autism. For the last 13 years, the clinical building has been providing comprehensive services for families and their children from two years of

age through high school and, for academically qualified individuals, the PSAP. The PSAP Circle of Support now serves 60 students who are diagnosed with ASD.

Stakeholders and Needs

The key stakeholders within the PSAP are the director, assistant director, three assistant program managers, mental health counselor, executive director, advisory board, and student participants and their families. The interest of the stakeholders in the program is for the participants to be exposed to the best practices available in order to build independence skills, academic success, communication skills, and future career goals.

General Methodology

The purpose of this evaluation is to determine the level of satisfaction of the stakeholders with the current components being offered and to allow those stakeholders to suggest or indicate improvements to the current programming. The overall design for this specific evaluation is a process evaluation with a non-experimental design. A logic model was developed to illustrate the current activities, short-term outcomes, long-term outcomes, and resources regarding the current programming of the PSAP (Appendix A). The study utilizes a mixed-methods approach using satisfaction surveys distributed to parents of current PSAP participants who were enrolled and part of the program in Spring 2019. A second satisfaction survey was distributed to the 54 participants. This portion of the study is a quantitative study using statistical analysis to determine the overall effectiveness of the program in the eyes of the major stakeholders. The qualitative portion of the study consists of a focus group comprised of the current full-time employees of the PSAP Circle of Support: the assistant director, three assistant program

managers, and the mental health counselor, with the program director moderating the session.

The study allows for open communication and a forum to voice opinions, satisfaction, concerns, and to make suggestions in a non-threatening anonymous format. The researcher's role is to assimilate the ideas and data presented to assist in the future direction and components of the program based on student needs. The study also provides information on the overall effectiveness of the support services offered.

Delimitations

Data were not collected on participants from previous semesters or parents of participants of earlier semesters. Data were collected using only current students who were enrolled in the PSAP for the entire spring semester to allow for an accurate comparison since components have been added, and some components of the program have been modified. The data needed to be collected on the most recent and current components and programming being offered. This study only consists of the findings from one university support program.

Limitations

Limitations, as defined by Creswell (2012), are weaknesses or possible problems that could be encountered through the study that the researcher cannot control. This research could lack strength, in that the researcher is directly involved with the support services being offered. This direct involvement could potentially lend itself to bias, as the participants may be hesitant to share their views.

The study also is limited by the perspectives and the perception of participants and their willingness to honestly and openly share their opinions, satisfaction, and

suggestions for improvement. The views and attitudes of the parents may be limited, as some may not be completely aware of the extent and value of the services being offered to their student participants.

Definitions

- *Autism spectrum disorders (ASD)* – “a developmental disability characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, as well as restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior. These deficits must cause clinically significant impairment in critical areas of functioning, be present in the early developmental period, and must not be better explained by Intellectual Disability (ID).” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013, p. 146)
- *Executive functioning* – “the concept of controlling attention, mental flexibility, goal-directed behavior, and the ability to anticipate the consequences of one's own behavior.” (Drigas, Demokritos & Karyotaki, 2019, p. 76)
- *Social Information Processing Theory* – “individuals process through a series of steps and mental processes that are activated in response to external social cues and deactivated on an individual's behavioral response.” (Crick & Dodge, 1994, p. 75)

Organization of Study

This paper consists of five chapters. Chapter I provides an introduction to the study. It includes a description of a Postsecondary Autism Support Program in an institution in the southeastern US and also gives a brief description of its current six components. Chapter I also gives an overview of the study's statement of the problem, the purpose, need for the study, delimitations, limitations, a list of definitions, and overall

organization. Chapter II provides a review of the literature focusing on ASD diagnosis, challenges facing postsecondary students with an ASD diagnosis, and transition issues for those students. Chapter III gives an overview of the organization of the study and the methodologies used for data collection. It also explains how participants were selected, an analysis of data, descriptions of the survey instruments, and a brief overview of the participants. Chapter IV provides results from the surveys along with reporting of focus group discussions, demographics of the participants, and a brief summary of data collection and analysis. Chapter V gives conclusions drawn from the study, reflections, possible implications, and recommendations for further study regarding the PSAP program based on the findings of this study.

The study combines both quantitative data and qualitative data derived from two surveys offered to students within the program and parents of students within the program. The students participating in the survey (Appendix B) were current students who were enrolled in the PSAP program for the spring semester of 2018. The survey focuses on the student giving feelings and perspectives on the six components offered within the PSAP program and overall feelings regarding the program. In addition to the Likert-scale questions, the students were offered the opportunity to contribute further perceptions by answering an open-ended question after every set of questions regarding the component and also regarding the program as a whole.

Parents also were surveyed using the same survey organization (Appendix C). Those asked to participate were only parents of the students who were enrolled in PSAP during the spring semester of 2018. They were given the opportunity to answer Likert-

scale questions. An open-ended question followed each set of questions about the components along with a group of questions regarding the program as a whole.

The final data collected in the study consisted of a focus group with the researcher acting as the facilitator. The participants in the focus group were the five full-time employees who all agreed to participate. They were asked to discuss a set of six questions. The session was recorded, coded, and analyzed for theme development. Chapter III elaborates on the research methods and procedures used in this study.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Background

According to the National Health Statistics Reports (NHSR), the prevalence of ASD could be as high as one in 45, which is a rise from the estimates of one in 80 from 2011-2013 (Zablotsky, Black, Maenner, Schieve, & Blumberg, 2015). The Center for Disease Control's (CDC, 2018) latest estimates indicate that 16.8% per 1000 eight-year-old children are diagnosed with ASD (one in 59). The current statistics show a 15% increase in the number of diagnoses since the 2014 estimates (Baio et al., 2018). This statistic proves a stark rise in only a few short years. "In the last 20 years, changes in the diagnostic specification of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) coupled with heightened public awareness has led to increased identification of children and adults with one of these disorders" (VanBergeijk, Klin, & Volkmar, 2008, p. 1359). This increase in the number of diagnoses also will lead to an increase in students diagnosed with autism who will be entering the higher education system in the coming years. Higher education needs to prepare to be able to handle the unique needs and accommodations that each individual student will require to be successful on a college campus. However, preparation does not begin at this level of education. College readiness and the skills necessary start as early as the early intervention and preschool years.

Longtin (2014) defined ASD as a complex neurodevelopmental disorder with symptoms ranging from difficulties with social interaction, communication, and restrictive and repetitive behavior. Longtin stated these characteristics manifest themselves at a wide range of severity. Generally, these symptoms will appear during the first three years of life; however, in those individuals with above average intelligence and

higher language skills, later diagnosis often occurs. Although those students on the spectrum have the academic intelligence to attend college and intellectually handle the material, they continue to face many challenges. Most of the students who attend college have had years of intervention and therapeutic services. However, the rigors of college pose challenges that require support as they journey through higher education. Longtin stated that some of those challenges include difficulty with routine changes; social challenges: and communicating with professors, peers, and other members of the college community.

Challenges for Postsecondary Students Diagnosed with ASD

Students with ASD are at a much higher risk for academic failure at the postsecondary level. These students make up approximately 1% of the student population attending postsecondary institutions. It is also suggested that 69% of those diagnosed with ASD have no co-morbid intellectual disability, with 46% of those individuals having average or possibly even above average intelligence. Studies have shown that these individuals have less access to services and the fewest options following secondary education than even individuals who are ASD and have a co-morbid intellectual deficit. Often, day programs and other adult services apply to those young adults. Conversely, those students without an intellectual impairment find themselves floundering and lost with very few options (Anderson et al., 2017).

Anderson et al. (2017) indicated that graduation rates for postsecondary students with ASD are significantly lower than their typically developing peers. The stats indicated a large gap of approximately 35%, as compared to 51-67% of those without an ASD diagnosis. It is also estimated that .07% to 1.9% of college students have

characteristics or meet the criteria for ASD. The causes of this discrepancy vary widely and are very complex. Although students with ASD have a vast array of strengths ranging from, but not limited to an excellent memory, a specialized knowledge of technology, and often a very focused nature. Unfortunately, the areas of need far supersede the areas of strength. Communication deficits/difficulties negatively impact classroom communication, especially when group assignments and presentations are involved. A need for structure and routine also can impact a student's success. Loneliness, sensory issues, anxiety, and depression often plague these individuals. Due to all of these factors, friendship development and hyper- or hyposensitivity to stimuli make completion of a degree a paramount task.

Many students have reported that academics were not a concern for them. The non-academic factors affected their success and persistence to a much higher degree. Anderson et al. (2017) also said that the non-academic issues are the major factors that result in less effectiveness of academic supports. The majority of students in this study reported that, although they felt confident in their academic skills and achievements, they felt they did not perform as well due to anxiety, sleep issues, depression, lack of companionship, and need for structure. Gardiner and Iarocci (2014) stated that the “characteristic social communication difficulties and co-morbid anxiety present the greatest obstacles to achieving academic success” (p. 1008).

Cai & Richdale (2016) noted that core ASD characteristics make it difficult for students to be successful in academic and non-academic settings. The first area they discussed was social communication. This area of deficit can have a significant impact on the student's relationships across differing situations and environments. Social

communication deficits can impact peer and friendship interactions, interactions and communication with teachers and staff, and could negatively impact academic performance. The authors found that many students did not want to be singled out or have attention solely on them; therefore, they would not seek out assistance. The social language deficit also often affected their ability to contribute to group projects and discussion. These activities can present substantial challenges to those on the spectrum (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Difficulty with social communication also can persist into the vocational setting.

A second area Cai and Richdale (2016) discussed was the need for structure, routine, and sensory needs. Students in this study overwhelmingly reported the need for routine and predictability. A lack of routine causes many students who have difficulty establishing this structure on their own to retreat into old habits and often find themselves unable to be successful at this level of education. A student's sensory needs can manifest in many ways and are very unique to the individual student, ranging from sensitivity to light, noise, smell, and/or touch. These are difficult to control at a campus setting (Cai & Richdale, 2016).

Cai and Richdale (2016) concurred with other researchers that anxiety, OCD, and depression plague students with ASD. The transition to postsecondary education can raise all levels of anxiety, and the student may not be equipped to handle issues. The study found that parents often trained themselves to notice the warning signs and assist the student in management. However, in college the student is away from home and on his/her own to develop coping strategies and management strategies. These strategies could include “reading, playing computer games, going to the library, seeing a counselor,

or avoiding anxiety-provoking places and situations” (Cai & Richdale, 2016 p. 36).

Global prevalence gives an estimate that one in 160 individuals are diagnosed on the autism spectrum worldwide with the prevalence in the US being markedly higher. This statistic would suggest that when cultures or populations receive excellent monitoring or healthcare, the incidence could be much more significant. Hudson, Hall, and Harkness (2018) suggested that some of the social interaction and peer relationship difficulties experienced in other psychiatric co-morbid diagnoses may resemble ASD. The rates of depressive disorders and co-morbidity with ASD are widely varied, ranging anywhere from 1% to 76% of individuals with ASD also having a diagnosis of unipolar depressive disorder. Several factors contribute to the wide discrepancy. One such factor, according to Hudson, Hall, and Harkness, was differentiating between other related contributors such as race, gender, and age. It is difficult to determine whether the depressive disorder is associated with ASD or other factors. Secondly, they discussed that intelligence level could affect the rates reported. It has been considered that students with higher intelligence, such as those who may be candidates to attend postsecondary education, may experience depressive disorders at a higher rate due to their higher level of awareness and understanding of their deficits (Hudson et al., 2018).

Executive functioning deficits are prevalent for students diagnosed with autism, and that becomes very evident at the postsecondary level of education. Van Eylen, Boets, Steyaert, Wagemans, and Noens (2015) described executive functioning skills as "an umbrella term covering several interrelated but distinct higher-order cognitive functions, serving goal-oriented regulation of thoughts and actions” (p. 1400). Van Eylen et al. found five domains that affect and overlap with executive functioning skills. First,

inhibition, which they described as the ability to control behavior and distractibility. Second, cognitive flexibility is the ability to switch thoughts and thought processes seamlessly. Generativity is the third domain, which is the ability to create and design ideas. The fourth domain described is working memory, which can be defined as the ability to "hold certain information active while performing a task" (p. 1400). The fifth and final domain is planning: the ability to look ahead and organize a task before beginning the completion of the task. Many students with ASD lack the skills required and reported they were unable to plan and organize assignments. They also reported being very distracted and having focus issues when they were disorganized and lacked a set plan (Cai & Richdale, 2015).

Cai and Richdale (2015) also discussed fine motor deficits as a challenge for ASD students. They noted that these students had slow and/or poor handwriting. These deficits caused the student to be at a disadvantage when taking notes and completing assessments and affected the completion of assignments in a designated amount of time. This deficit also made it difficult for handwritten assignments to be deciphered and understood by peers and teachers.

The literature that exists regarding social belonging and connectedness and college participation is limited. The studies that exist have been promising and contain results with implications to suggest that a sense of belonging and social connectedness does link to a student's persistence in continuing to pursue a degree.

Ashbaugh, Koegel, and Koegel (2017) stated that students with ASD continue to have difficulties with communication and socialization throughout their life span. "These difficulties can create specific barriers to successful outcomes in the transition phase to

adulthood” (p. 1). This barrier can have a significant impact on success in higher education. The authors went on to say that quality of life, employment opportunities, self-confidence, and personal skill building are all impacted by the ability to succeed in their college endeavors. Students with ASD often report a sense of loneliness and difficulty with social interaction, even though the desire for those relationships is felt. Unfortunately, at the college or university level, only limited resources and services exist for these students. The literature has suggested that socialization with typically developing peers and integration into the community for students on the spectrum can promote engagement and relationship building.

The study by Ashbaugh, Koegel, and Koegel (2017) looked at the “effectiveness of a structured social planning intervention on measures related to social integration with the community and college environment” (p. 2). The study included three individuals aged 18-25 diagnosed with ASD who were enrolled in the higher education setting, did not have a history of aggression, were able to speak in full sentences, and demonstrated social difficulties. Three of the most severe out of a pool of 10 were chosen for the study.

Each participant was assigned a peer mentor. This mentor was close in age to the participant in the study. The mentor attended social engagements with the participant and provided supports during social interactions. The supports included modeling and guiding during the actual interactions. They also provided feedback following the interactions and attended one clinic session each month with the participant to provide specific feedback. During the clinic sessions attended weekly, the clinician provided assistance with future meetings and social activities. The intervention sessions also consisted of support with organization and social skills training. The results indicated

that all three participants increased their social involvement. They all reported more satisfaction and, subsequently, also showed improvements in academic performance. These results suggest that further studies or replicating this study on a larger scale may help to guide programs and university administration in future planning for those on the spectrum (Ashbaugh et al., 2017).

The delay in social communication, if not addressed during high school for the transition to college or during the postsecondary education programs, will continue into employment. Many institutions offer vocational guidance through internships, job coaching, shadowing, and facilitating networking opportunities. All of these are important but do not specifically address the communication deficits that remain for a student diagnosed with ASD. A social coaching package increased the student's social interactions in the workplace. Direct social training and guidance also can increase task engagement after job coaching has been discontinued. Job coaching, as a support, can be an effective form of support to increase job participation and productivity of those diagnosed with ASD following postsecondary graduation and employment (Gilson & Carter, 2016).

These studies show the importance of social engagement in the success of those individuals diagnosed with ASD. They also indicate a need for further research and additional information regarding social belonging, social skill instruction, and direct support and how these supports can positively impact success in education and the workplace.

Supports for ASD Students at Postsecondary Level of Education

The transition for students with ASD from secondary to postsecondary education should start early and be very deliberate. An individualized education plan (IEP) should outline strengths and weaknesses and address those as the student approaches the considerable transition. “A well-developed IEP may serve as a blueprint for the individualization of services at the university level” (VanBerjeijk et al., 2008, p. 1363). It is also suggested that an ‘Individualized College Plan’ could be utilized to pinpoint the accommodations and needs of each individual student. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires a transition plan for all high school students who qualify for an IEP and outlines plans and direction post-high school graduation. It is imperative for this plan to be specific, complete, and the student be involved in the process.

VanBerjeijk et al. (2008) also provided a plan for transition, which stated that the student with ASD must first find a university that is a fit for him/her and his/her needs and special considerations. The authors discussed a tri-modal approach, which could be considered for the college setting. It includes home-based services, center-based services, and school-based programming. The home-based services would be conducted in their current residence and offer more structure and less social pressure. The center-based program assists students in a separate environment with teaching assistants who are trained in serving students on the autism spectrum. Finally, a school-based program would be very different from the center-based. In this program, the services needed for the individual student would be offered in the classroom environment. It is crucial for a student and his/her family to consider which model or program type is more conducive to

the student's learning style and needs and to consider what that particular university offers as its model (VanBerjeijk et al., 2008).

VanBerjeijk, et al., (2008) continues its discussion of transition needs to discuss the necessity of a committed and informed office of student disabilities. Parents and students should ask essential and pertinent questions about not only the services offered, but also the types of disabilities with which the office and the personnel are familiar. Students with ASD require unique and specific support and unique modifications due to the social language component and the executive functioning deficits that often exist (VanBerjeijk et al., 2008).

The office of student disabilities at each university or institution is responsible for overseeing and providing accommodations needed and modifications for each student who is diagnosed with and has documentation of a disability; ASD is no exception to that rule. The authors (VanBerjeijk, et al., 2008) stated that “three percent of the college student population self-identifies as having some disability, research suggests that faculty have limited understanding of the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] and a student's rights to modifications in a university setting” (p. 1364). Students with a documented disability will receive services and accommodations only if the student registers with the office of disabilities on that particular campus. Modifications for a student on the autism spectrum may include, but are not limited to the following: note-taking assistance, use of a laptop in class, a scribe, organization assistance, having assignments broken down into smaller segments with specific steps, and supplying the student with presentations or slides for the class. Students also may qualify for extended time on exams and/or the ability to take their exams in a physically different environment to decrease distraction

and test anxiety. There are computer programs and other resources that could be available to a student depending on the individual needs of that student; each should discuss the options and qualifications with a representative from the office of disability services (VanBerjeijk et al., 2008).

Cai and Richdale (2015) stated that a positive relationship, registration, and communication with the office of disabilities on the campus could be beneficial. The participants in their study reported that most found the support they received positive. However, some found there were negative experiences. The support staff must be knowledgeable concerning ASD and provide support and meetings in a timely manner. Anxiety and stress can be lessened with timely and knowledgeable support.

Social functioning is an area in which colleges and universities are not as familiar or feel they need to accommodate their students. The personnel are accustomed to providing academic support. However, they are not as equipped to deal with the non-academic concerns that come with a student with ASD. A student on the spectrum may experience difficulties transitioning to a new environment and experience challenges with day-to-day tasks, interacting with roommates and classmates, and communication with professors. They also are at high risk for issues with sexuality and relationship appropriateness. Dating and sexual conduct could pose risks to a student with ASD. These risks include lack of knowledge of how to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy and disease, boundaries, privacy, and modesty. The literature has suggested that direct instruction and role play is needed to train this population and must be done across environments, as generalization to other settings can be difficult for a student on the spectrum (VanBerjeijk et al., 2008).

VanBerjeijk et al. (2008) also highlighted the need for mental health support for students with ASD. As previously mentioned, many students have a co-morbid diagnosis of anxiety and depression. Transition to a college/university setting can trigger high anxiety and emotions that are very difficult for a student with ASD to reason through and handle. Mental health counseling and support is critical to students during their tenure at a university but highly critical during the transition phase. It also is vital to train university personnel, such as the resident advisors, to watch for warning signs and be aware of changes in behavior. The resident advisors may be the first to notice these signs and have the ability to report and hopefully prevent what could be a crisis for these students.

Peer mentoring has been a notable support system for students with ASD. Gardiner and Iarocci (2014) found that students reported more positive experiences at the postsecondary level when paired with a peer mentor from that campus. The study also indicated that training and:

The need to pair students with and without ASD, such as peer mentorship initiatives, should be followed, so that inclusion of the elements identifies as most central to acceptance (i.e., positive contact) can be incorporated within mentor training, and associated acceptance-related outcomes (both cognitive and behavioral). (p. 1015)

A barrier to receiving the supports and services needed in postsecondary education could be found in the need of disclosure of the disability. Cai and Richdale (2015) found during their study that students disclosed their disability at enrollment *only* when urged or required by the parent. Anderson et al. (2017) noted that their participants

relayed several reasons for not disclosing their disability. The students reported they wanted to try on their own, believed disclosure was unnecessary, did not know how to disclose, feared the stigma, or they were fine when they enrolled, and their condition worsened. The study revealed those who did not disclose did not report being as satisfied with their overall college experience (Anderson et al., 2017).

Transition from Secondary to Postsecondary Activities and the Workplace

Many individuals with the diagnosis of ASD continue to remain somewhat dependent on the support of their family beyond graduation, with at least 50% remaining in the family home. Although social deficits, communication difficulties, and repetitive behaviors tend to improve, they do continue into adulthood and with continued therapy (Cai & Richdale, 2015).

A meaningful career can contribute to a person's sense of accomplishment, self-worth, and confidence; promote independence and self-determination; provide a venue to share strengths and talents in ways that are valued by others; lead to new friendships and supportive relationships; and offer deeper connections to, and engagement in, larger community. It is not surprising, therefore, that preparing adolescents and young adults for the world of work has remained a dominant theme of secondary educational and transitional efforts for more than two decades. (Lee & Carter, 2012, p. 988)

It should come as no surprise that students on the autism spectrum have the same desires and aspirations as those who are neurotypical and entering education, exiting the education system, or entering the workforce. Lee and Carter (2012) stated that, for students on the autism spectrum, "meaningful work remains unacceptably elusive" (p.

989). They reported that 50.2 % of students exiting high school have not had any type of work experience sponsored by their school. They also reported that only 14.5% have had any summer or part-time job experience. Opportunities for job-related activities are meager at the secondary level. Those opportunities remain just as elusive following graduation. Lee and Carter reported studies show that eight years following graduation, only 63.2% of those individuals diagnosed with ASD had worked at all. Only 37.2% of individuals diagnosed with ASD were currently employed. Even more disturbing is that the statistics showed they were averaging only 24.1 hours per week with a pay rate of \$9.20 per hour, which is a stark difference compared to those individuals without a disability (Lee & Carter, 2012). Taylor and Seltzer (2011) found that “almost one-third of young adults with autism who did not have a co-morbid intellectual disability in their longitudinal sample was not participating in any employment or college experiences” (p. 567).

Lee and Carter (2012) proposed key components of promising transition services to assist those with high functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFASD) to hold meaningful work experiences. They begin with the need for individualized strengths-based supports, although the typical transition plan includes the needs of the individual. Lee and Carter also highlighted the need to discuss and target the strengths of each student in the transition plans and to begin to draw on those as direction for future work-related experiences. An example of a characteristic of ASD that can be positive in a workplace environment may involve attention to detail. This focus and precision could be attractive to an employer and seen as a positive to be emphasized and communicated to the individual as a vocational strength.

Lee and Carter (2012) discussed positive career development and early work experiences as a component of a promising transition. They suggested that access to career development activities should begin as early as middle school and could help to focus their career aspirations and goals. They also suggested that summer and after-school employment opportunities, internships, or school-based vocational opportunities can make a tremendous impact on the career readiness of those diagnosed with ASD. Although research has indicated that these various work experiences are proven to be positive, only 15% of young HFASD students held a paying job and only 1% had internship opportunities. Lee and Carter listed a number of barriers. A few potential barriers included “attitudes and expectations of general and vocational educators, concerns about student’s social-related challenges, the availability of needed adaptations and supports, and the preferences of youth themselves” (p. 992).

Meaningful collaboration and interagency involvement are the next transition components. Relationships need to be built between the student and the service providers to ensure the needs are adequately supported and addressed. The services a student with HFASD receives could be vast and many service providers could be involved in the support services. “When designed thoughtfully, such linkages may also promote more excellent continuity in services and supports as young people and their family’s transition across services systems” (Lee & Carter, 2012, p. 992).

Family supports and their expectations are of significant importance to transitioning a student effectively. Lee and Carter (2012) stated that parents play an essential role in shaping their child with HFASD's perceptions about work and career. Their support during the adolescent years both verbally and physically can be of

paramount influence as the student develops a work ethic and experience. To add to this role of parents and other support staff is the fostering of self-determination and independence. “Although defined differently across disciplines, self-determination generally refers to having the skills, attitudes, and supports to steer one’s own life in ways and directions that enhance valued outcomes” (Lee & Carter, 2012, p. 993). Self-efficacy and advocacy all lead to higher self-determination. Teaching and fostering these skills in students can lead to positive outcomes and attitudes but can be exceptionally helpful for those with HFASD. The literature on self-determination and its impact is sparse at best as related to HFASD. However, the research has indicated these five factors should be considered when designing intervention:

1. Social and work-related instruction should be a primary focus;
2. Instructional efforts should be driven by careful assessment and a clear understanding of the nature of the students’ skill deficits;
3. Critical skills are contextually determined;
4. Skills should be taught within the settings in which students will ultimately be expected to use them; and
5. Job coaches and vocational counselors can play an important role in observing and discussing specific workplace challenges.

A final promising transition need is establishing job-related supports. The literature has suggested that maintaining jobs and promoting within the workplace is a challenge for students with HFASD. Many individuals find it supportive and helpful to have on-the-jobsite supports available. This provision of support could be in the form of a job coach or assigned peer. There also are positive outcomes when an employer is

familiar with and receptive to the needs of those with disabilities in the employer environment. It is very important the student be familiar with and understand the need to disclose his/her disability in the workplace environment. This disclosure can be uncomfortable to the individual with the disability but can lead to more understanding and a smoother transition (Lee & Carter, 2012). Lee and Carter (2012) also highlighted that the individual should be educated and have an understanding of his/her rights as it relates to the Americans with Disabilities Act, have a clear understanding of the accommodations promised under this act, and how to access these rights in the workplace environment. Training for coworkers and supervisors should be conducted and monitored regularly. It is important for supervisors to provide:

Clear and consistent instructions, schedules and consequences; building in time to enable youth to learn new skills; providing effective reminders and reassurances; incorporating organizational tactics (e.g. use of organizers, instruction sheets, checklists); reducing unstructured time; and avoiding sensory and stimulation overloads. (Lee & Carter, 2012, p. 995)

These tasks sound daunting to an employer, but once the commitment is seen, the supports become more natural and generalize in the environment.

Meeks, Masterson, and Westlake (2015) provided details regarding the Career Connect: Employment Resource Model developed at Arizona State Polytechnic Campus and Case Western Reserve University. This program helps researchers, job coaches, counselors, and those who work with HFASD individuals to support employment skills. This particular program assists students with disabilities to access employment through a direct partnership with the U.S. Government Workforce Recruitment program and Entry

Point. Entry Point is a program involved with The American Academy for the Advancement of Science (AAAS).

The Career Connect: Employment Resource Model's collaboration includes training in ASD, assigning a liaison in all three departments, supporting meeting to assist in career development goals, and facilitating students' applications to the participating programs. It focuses on building partnerships between career services and counseling centers. The program also focuses on deliberate training of both the career services center staff and the counseling center in ASD characteristics and their strengths and needs. Students are supported and given preparation for interviews through a collaborative effort. The disability resource department screens candidates to make sure they meet the criteria and then offer additional services such as support groups and support meetings. The career center prepares them for the employment process. They host workshops focusing on program introduction, resumes, and interview preparation. The counseling center trains in best practices in engaging with students with ASD. Each center receives three hours of training on understanding and supporting students with ASD. They also have started two weekly support group meetings that related directly to employment (Meeks et al., 2015).

An evaluation of the program indicated, through an anecdotal report, that individuals with ASD had an overall good experience and gained educational benefits from the offerings. They possessed a grasp and knowledge of the resources available to them, a heightened awareness of accommodations available to them in the workplace, and they reported a reduction in their own personal anxiety regarding employment and a sense of confidence approaching the skills needed (Meeks et al., 2015).

“Employment is an essential part of the development of self-efficacy” (Meeks et al., 2015, p. 25). Gainful employment can not only financially improve the lives of those with ASD, but also it can reduce clinical symptoms and other behaviors and improve how an individual feels about his/her daily life. Due to the strengths that students with ASD possess (e.g., hyper focus, intact cognitive abilities), they often are seen as not needing assistance or support when gaining employment. Supports are necessary due to other concomitant characteristics and symptoms and the effects on their employment success (Lee & Carter, 2012).

Summary

“Autism spectrum disorder is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder whose primary features are social communication deficits and restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of activities, interests, and sensory sensitivities” (Cai & Richdale, 2015, p. 31). The rise in diagnoses over the last decade indicates that many of these individuals will be entering the postsecondary education system and the workforce on a yearly basis. Cai and Richdale (2015) estimated that currently 1.9% of young people with an ASD diagnosis enroll in the postsecondary education system.

These students’ success and ability to enroll in their education and/or obtain meaningful employment is directly tied to the services and supports they receive at each level of maturity and education. These supports could include non-academic supports such as peer mentoring, mental health support, counseling services, consultation with a disability support staff, training on self-advocacy, ASD support groups, campus social clubs, transition support, and housing accommodations. Academic supports could include:

1. Time management and/or task prioritization;

2. Assistance with structuring assignments;
3. Understanding abstract concepts;
4. Assistance with group work or presentations;
5. Stress management training;
6. Liaison with academics;
7. Tutoring center;
8. Note-taker/scribe;
9. Lecture transcription;
10. Recorded lectures;
11. On-line discussion boards; and
12. Reduced workload.

Without direct instruction and an individual plan for each student, they are at risk of academic failure. Literature has suggested that a variety of academic and non-academic supports, along with vocational supports, should be considered and in place on all postsecondary education campuses and settings to begin to accommodate and assist students with ASD in reaching their utmost potential both educationally and personally.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the feelings and perceptions regarding the Postsecondary Autism Program (PSAP) providing support to individuals who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as they attend a university in the southeastern US. Second, the study investigated the improvements the leadership determined could be made in regard to the support offered through the program. This chapter describes the methodology of the study, including purpose, research questions, research design, sample instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and summary.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to investigate the feelings and perceptions of the stakeholders of the Postsecondary Autism Program Circle of Support, which provides assistance and support for individuals diagnosed on the autism spectrum. The study assessed and rated the six components of service offered to the students who were accepted to the PSAP and improvements that can be made to ensure the program met the goals of the stakeholders. Those six components included: access to individual rooms at the rate of double occupancy rooms in the residence halls, peer mentoring program, study tables with tutoring, weekly advising with a PSAP full-time staff member, planned monthly social events, and access to a mental health counselor. Second, the study investigated what, if any, improvements could be made to ensure that the program was meeting the expectations and objectives set forth by the stakeholders. The study was guided by the questions discussed in the next section.

Key Research Questions

1. How do the stakeholders rate the six components of the Postsecondary Autism Program?
2. What components of the Postsecondary Autism Program do stakeholders identify as most helpful?
3. What improvements could leadership make regarding the Postsecondary Autism Program?

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to analyze the feelings and perceptions of the stakeholders involved with or receiving services from the programming offered by the PSAP and to determine the needs or improvements that could be made to assist with student matriculation and retention at the university. The goals of a process evaluation are to identify the feelings and perceptions of the program and gain knowledge about the perceptions of the help provided through the eyes of a particular group of participants. The research design of this project was a mixed-methods approach combining both qualitative and quantitative data to ensure rich data were obtained. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) defined a mixed-method approach as:

Mixed methods research is the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints,

data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (p. 123)

Combining the two methods of research can make the findings stronger and provide triangulation of research in an attempt to ensure consistency or corroboration of the findings by using varying collection measures. A mixed-methods approach to this evaluation was chosen to give multiple perspectives and to allow current stakeholders the opportunity to voice their opinions in ways that made the data more robust. The pragmatic paradigm for program evaluation was used to provide structure for the evaluation. Mertens and Wilson (2012) described this paradigm and linked it to the use branch of program evaluation. This paradigm and branch assisted in focusing on data the program would find useful and valuable to the stakeholders for future decision making and program design. In direct contrast to other paradigms that suggest an evaluator needs to be detached from the program to give a true unbiased evaluation, the pragmatist approach suggests that the researcher is “free to study what interests you and is of value to you, study in different ways that you deem appropriate, and utilize the results in ways that can bring about positive consequences within your value system” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p. 30).

Population and Sample

The sampling included clients who participated in the PSAP and were enrolled in the program during the spring semester 2019. All of these individuals had a diagnosis of ASD and were currently receiving varied levels of support within the PSAP program. The group asked to participate consisted of five women and 49 men from 10 states, including Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, Mississippi, Tennessee, Ohio, Texas, Indiana,

California, and Georgia. The class breakdown included 18 freshmen, 21 sophomores, eight juniors, five seniors, and two graduate students (Figure 1). The group had varying majors and were all seeking a four-year degree or a graduate degree. The class rank was determined by number of credit hours achieved by each student within the program. The parents/guardians of the 54 students who were enrolled during the Spring 2019 semester also were surveyed. The survey was sent to 60 parents of whom email addresses were available. Five current full-time staff members employed within the program for the Spring 2019 semester participated to allow them to give their perceptions and varying experiences. This sample was explicitly chosen to allow consistent comparisons. The six components of the program had been in place for this entire time frame and allowed accurate comparisons.

Figure 1. Student Classification of Students Surveyed

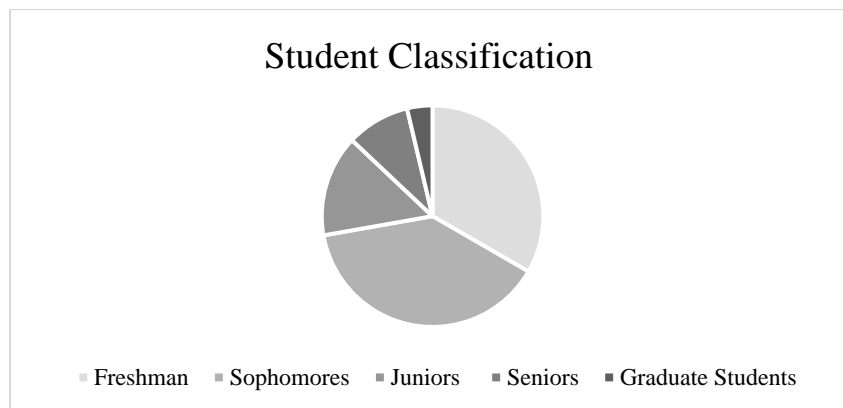


Figure 1. Student Classification of Students Surveyed. This figure demonstrates the number of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors and graduate students who completed the survey.

Instrumentation

To explore the perceptions and experiences of those who participated in the study, the data were analyzed using the responses to two surveys that were developed by the

researcher. The study also used a six-question, open-ended questionnaire developed by the researcher to use for focus group questions. Validity is essential to any research project. Muijs (2004) described validity as measuring what you say you are trying to measure. The instrument was read and reviewed for content validity and face validity by the two full-time employees with a background in autism and knowledge of the PSAP program, as well as the executive director. The executive director has a background in autism and first-hand knowledge of the PSAP programming. Muijs (2004) referred to content validity as “whether or not the content of the manifest variables is right to measure the latent concept that we are trying to measure” (p. 57). A second type of validity that was considered was face validity of the executive director of the clinical education site and two individuals who were employed within the clinical education site. One of these individuals had previously worked within the PSAP program as an assistant program manager, and the other previously worked within the program as a student employee. All three had knowledge of the PSAP program components and procedures. The focus group question instrument was sent to these three individuals by email, and they were given the opportunity to comment and express concerns or approval. The researcher asked if the instrument appeared valid to their knowledge. All answered that the questions appeared valid and also appeared to be a good measure of feelings and perceptions concerning the current programming. The researcher assessed the validity of the survey instruments in two ways. First, one survey was sent to five former students in the program who were no longer a part of the program for varying reasons. These individuals had been supported by the six components of the program previously. The parent survey was sent to those five students’ parents/guardians. They were asked to take

the survey and present feedback as they desired. The survey and full explanation were sent to these individuals by email. Confidentiality and the voluntary nature were discussed. Two of the five students responded and completed the survey. Neither had any suggestions, and both felt it was a good measure of program component effectiveness. The results from their answers are not a part of the research results. One of the parents completed the second survey and responded. That responder thought the instrument was a good measure and the content was adequate to achieve the desired result. Secondly, the surveys were supplied to full-time staff and the clinical education site's executive director to make suggestions. The six full-time employees and the clinical education site executive director all agreed the instrument content was adequate to measure the feelings and perceptions of the current programming. The executive director made minor adjustments in wording. Those changes were made before distributing the survey to any of the potential participants.

The first survey (Appendix B) was developed for use with students who were currently receiving services through PSAP. The survey designed for the students within the program included 54 questions. Nine of the questions were demographic questions to capture personal characteristics of the subjects. The remaining 45 were designed to capture opinions and perceptions concerning the effectiveness of the support being offered by the program. The survey contained five questions about each of the six areas of support and five questions about the overall perceptions of the program as a whole. Each of these question groupings were followed by one open-ended question, which was presented as an option if the participant had a suggestion or comment to share with the

researcher. The final two open-ended questions gave the respondent the opportunity to report the area of support they personally found most beneficial.

The second survey (Appendix C) was developed to explore the perceptions and opinions of the parents/guardians of the current students receiving services within the PSAP. The instrument contained eight demographic questions to obtain personal and professional information and 43 questions exploring their opinions about each of the six areas of support offered by the program and the program as a whole. Eight open-ended questions also were offered to allow the participants to make suggestions or comments concerning any of these areas of support if they desired.

Last, a six-question questionnaire was developed (Appendix D) by the researcher to be used with full-time staff to capture their perceptions as a guide for a focus group discussion. The questions were presented orally and served to guide the discussion concerning the program and their opinions and experiences concerning the six components of the program and their satisfaction, challenges, and barriers with these components.

Procedures

A logic model was developed to illustrate the current activities, short-term outcomes, long-term outcomes, and resources regarding the current programming of the PSAP (Appendix A). Data collection occurred during the spring semester of 2019. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board at Western Kentucky University (Appendix E), the researcher met with each of the advisors within the Postsecondary Autism Program. During the meeting, the researcher discussed the purpose of the study and the procedures involved. Each of the advisors was asked to present and read a script

designed by the researcher to each of the students under their caseload explaining the survey, its purpose, the confidential nature, and the right to refuse to participate. The advisors then presented the opportunity to participate to each of the 54 students within the program. Students were provided with informed consent forms (Appendix F) that explained their right to participate voluntarily and their right to withdraw their consent to participate in the research at any time.

The students who agreed to engage in the study then signed the informed consent document and were given a link to complete the survey at their convenience. This also allowed the students a period of time to consider whether they would like to continue with the survey following the advisor introduction. The students were supplied a link to the survey, allowing them to complete the survey at their convenience. The link and the flexibility were provided to relieve any pressure the student participant may have felt when given the information during his/her advisor meeting. The aim of supplying the link for later participation was a deliberate strategy of relieving pressure to participate in the study.

The second survey was offered to the parents/guardians of the participating students. The survey link, informed consent, and a written explanation of the project procedures and purpose were sent to 54 parents/guardians of each student currently within the program. The parents also were informed that their participation was voluntary. They did not sign a written consent. Their completion of the survey acted as consent and was fully disclosed to the potential completers (Appendix G). A follow-up email was sent as a reminder to the same group six weeks later. A final email reminder was sent three weeks later as a final offer to participate.

The third portion of the research project included conducting a focus group of full-time staff members. There are five full-time staff members of the PSAP Circle of Support. The positions include director, assistant director, three assistant program managers, and a mental health counselor. The director acted as the facilitator for the discussion and invited the other five full-time employees to give their feedback to six questions presented verbally. The employees were invited to participate by email and were given a written consent to participate (Appendix H). They were all informed that their participation was voluntary, and they would not be penalized for not participating or for responses given during the discussion. Of the five invited potential participants, all attended the focus group. The six prepared questions were asked verbally, and the responses were recorded and transcribed. Each individual was given time to answer any and all questions and then asked to add any information in writing to the researcher if they wanted to share additional information. The session was recorded and transcribed using an Otter recording device to ensure the accuracy of data being collected.

Data Collection

Responses were collected using Qualtrics and exported to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The data points were entered into Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program (JASP) for statistical analysis. JASP is an open-source program for analysis of statistics, which is supported through the University of Amsterdam. The quantitative data were then analyzed by descriptive statistics on both parents' responses and students' responses. The data were placed in comparative tables to compare their perceptions concerning the six offered components within the PSAP. Data also were gathered to determine the component that both parents and students found most helpful in supporting them as the

students continued their education. The areas of support were then ranked in the order that each group of participants found most helpful.

The qualitative data were coded, and subsequent themes were developed. According to Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, and Snelgrove (2016), qualitative approaches to collection of data sources and the act of analyzing that data “aims to provide an in-depth, socio-contextual and detailed description and interpretation of research topics” (p. 100). The transcripts derived from the five full-time staff members who participated in the focus responses were first coded for positive versus negative feelings about each of the six components. Comments were then analyzed and placed in an Excel spreadsheet according to assigned participant number and component on which they had commented to determine themes. Vaismoradi et al. explained that interpreting and developing themes in qualitative data is more abstract and requires the researcher to interpret implications of the comments along with the underlying meanings of the responses.

Summary

Chapter III described the methodology used in this mixed-methods program evaluation study. The study used two Likert-scale surveys and a six-question, open-ended survey to provide rich data results. The sampling and the study participants also were described as a part of this chapter. Finally, procedures for data collection and data analysis were described. Chapter IV presents the research findings and analyses.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This study was a program evaluation of a postsecondary autism program (PSAP) offered at a university in the southeastern US. The program serves students who are diagnosed on the autism spectrum and who are seeking a degree from the university. The PSAP offers six components to assist and support students as these students matriculate through their degree programs. The researcher used both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the research questions proposed. The quantitative data were analyzed using Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program (JASP), which is an open-source program used to analyze statistics and is supported by the University of Amsterdam. The qualitative data were transcribed and coded. Themes were then developed and comments were discussed based on the components. This chapter is organized by evidence collected regarding each of the six components of support offered through the program. The six components are as follows:

1. Individual/private residence hall rooms
2. Study tables
3. Mentoring
4. Socials
5. Mental health counseling
6. Weekly advising

Descriptive statistics were analyzed by comparing the parents' and the students' responses. Summary statistics were obtained for each area of support. Means and standard deviation scores are reported. The data were collected using two surveys developed by the researcher. The first survey was distributed to current participants

within the PSAP who were currently enrolled in both the program and at the university for the spring 2019 semester. This participant survey contained 54 questions: nine demographic questions followed by 45 Likert-scale questions. Each question grouping was followed by an open-ended question. The survey was sent to 54 client participants, with 51 of those responding for a response rate of 94%. One client participant began the survey by answering the demographic questions; however, he/she did not answer any of the contextual questions about the program. The survey for that student was not considered within the results.

A second survey was distributed to 60 parents whose children were currently enrolled within the PSAP. Thirty parents responded to the survey, translating to a response rate of 50%. This survey was comprised of eight demographic questions followed by 43 Likert-scale questions, with each question grouping followed by an open-ended question that explored their perceptions and opinions concerning the support services their student was receiving. The scale for these results was as follows:

- 1 – Strongly Agree
- 2 – Agree
- 3 – Neutral
- 4 – Disagree
- 5 – Strongly Disagree

A sixth choice was given on those questions in which the component was not mandatory to attend. A choice of “Not Applicable to Me” or “Not Applicable to My Student” was given on the questions regarding individual rooms and mental health counseling. Those areas of support were offered but do not require participation.

In addition to the survey results, a focus group was conducted. The group consisted of the five full-time staff with the researcher serving as the facilitator. The

groups were asked six questions from a questionnaire (Appendix D) to guide the group discussion. The discussion was recorded using an Otter recording program. The transcripts were analyzed using a thematic approach to determine themes in responses regarding each component of the supports offered. A thematic analysis approach included forming codes to data collected from the interview transcripts (Gibson, William, & Brown, 2009). Participants' feelings and opinions concerning the PSAP were separated and placed into themes by comments made concerning each area of support offered, most beneficial areas of support, and program needs and improvements. The transcripts were coded, analyzed, and themes developed. Salient comments were designated under each area of support.

Key Research Questions

1. How do the stakeholders rate the six components of the Postsecondary Autism Program?
2. What components of the Postsecondary Autism Program do stakeholders identify as most helpful?
3. What improvements could leadership make regarding the Postsecondary Autism Program?

Results

This section indicates the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Supporting tables and figures are provided.

Demographics of Students

Age distribution. The student participants' ages ranged from 18-26 years of age, with the mean age being 21.2 years.

Table 1

Age Distribution of Student Participants

| Age | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|-----------|---------|----------------|--------------------|
| 18 | 4 | 8.00 | 8.16 | 8.16 |
| 19 | 7 | 14.00 | 14.29 | 22.45 |
| 20 | 8 | 16.00 | 16.33 | 38.78 |
| 21 | 14 | 28.00 | 28.57 | 67.35 |
| 22 | 7 | 14.00 | 14.29 | 81.63 |
| 23 | 4 | 8.00 | 8.16 | 89.80 |
| 24 | 1 | 2.00 | 2.04 | 91.84 |
| 25 | 3 | 6.00 | 6.12 | 97.96 |
| 26 | 1 | 2.00 | 2.04 | 100.00 |
| Missing | 1 | 2.00 | Align decimals | |
| Total | 50 | 100.00 | | |

Table 2 indicates the gender distribution of those students who responded. One respondent did not indicate gender. Of the students who responded, 88% were male and 10% were female. The CDC (2018) reported that the incidence of ASD is four times more likely in males than in females. The responses in Table 2 are indicative of that statistic.

Table 2

Gender of Student Participants

| Gender | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|-----------|---------|----------------|--------------------|
| Female | 5 | 10.00 | 10.20 | 10.20 |
| Male | 44 | 88.00 | 89.80 | 100.00 |
| Missing | 1 | 2.00 | | |
| Total | 50 | 100.00 | Align decimals | |

Table 3 gives a visual representation of the year in college of the students who responded. The number of freshmen to seniors was relatively evenly distributed. Twelve freshmen, 14 sophomores, nine juniors, and 14 seniors responded to the survey, for a total of 50 student participants.

Table 3

Year in College of Student Participants

| Year in College | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Freshman | 12 | 24.00 | 24.49 | 24.49 |
| Sophomore | 14 | 28.00 | 28.57 | 42.86 |
| Junior | 9 | 18.00 | 18.37 | 71.43 |
| Senior | 14 | 28.00 | 28.57 | 100.00 |
| Missing | 1 | 2.00 | | |
| Total | 50 | | | |

Table 4 includes the reported grade point averages of those students who responded to the survey. Five of the student participants did not answer, with one reporting below a 2.0 grade point average and only seven reporting a 2.0 to 2.5. Of the students who responded, 72% had a 3.0 grade point average or higher.

Table 4

Reported GPA of Student Participants

| GPA | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Less than 2.0 | 1 | 2.00 | 2.04 | 14.29 |
| 2.0-2.5 | 7 | 14.00 | 14.29 | 42.86 |
| 2.5-3.0 | 14 | 28.00 | 28.57 | 73.47 |
| 3.0-3.5 | 15 | 30.00 | 30.61 | 87.76 |
| 3.5-4.0 | 7 | 14.00 | 14.29 | 89.80 |
| Unknown/None | 5 | 10.00 | 10.20 | 100.00 |
| Missing | 1 | 2.00 | | |

Table 4

Reported GPA of Student Participants

| GPA | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Total | 50 | 100.00 | | |

Demographics of Parents

Regarding the education of those parents who responded, Table 5 is a visual representation of parent education levels. According to the findings, 3.33% had an associate's degree, 53.33% had obtained a bachelor's degree, and 40% had a master's degree or higher. One parent participant reported he/she had some college but did not obtain a degree. This demonstrated a percentage of parent participants with some level of a college education at 100.00% of those who responded, with 96.67% holding a postsecondary degree.

Table 5

Level of Education of Parent Participants

| Level of Education | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Some college completed | 1 | 3.33 | 3.33 | 3.33 |
| Associate's degree | 1 | 3.33 | 3.33 | 56.67 |
| Bachelor's degree | 16 | 53.33 | 53.33 | 96.67 |
| Master's degree or higher | 12 | 40.00 | 40.00 | 100.00 |
| Missing | 0 | 0.00 | | |
| Total | 30 | 100.00 | align | |

Table 6 indicates the reported annual household income of the parents who participated in the study. It is noted that the combined household income of those families was approximately \$40,000, with 56.67% being \$120,000 a year or higher. Of the 30 who responded, only two reported a household income of \$40,000-\$80,000 a year at a rate of 6.67% of parent respondents.

Table 6

Yearly Household Income of Parent Participants

Add a horizontal line at the bottom of the table

| Household Income | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| \$40,000-80,000 | 2 | 6.67 | 6.90 | 58.62 |
| \$80,000-120,000 | 10 | 33.33 | 34.48 | 65.52 |
| \$120,000+ | 17 | 56.67 | 58.62 | 100.00 |
| Missing | 1 | 3.33 | | |
| Total | 30 | 100.00 | | |

Demographics of Focus Group

The focus group was comprised of five full-time employees with the researcher acting as the facilitator. All five of the full-time employees hold a bachelor’s degree or higher, with three of the five holding a master’s degree. Their backgrounds included early childhood education, math, special education, social work, and interdisciplinary studies. The group was comprised of two female and three male participants.

Area of Support

Individual/private residence room. Individual residence hall rooms were offered to the students who participated in the PSAP program. Traditionally when entering a university, students are placed in a joint room with a roommate either randomly assigned or a requested roommate. The students who were enrolled in the PSAP were given the option of living in a university residence hall room with a roommate or alone. This component of the program was optional. Approximately 91% of those students participating in the program chose to live in the residence hall room without a roommate.

An agreement with the department of housing and residence life at the university allows these students to live alone at the same cost of having a roommate. The survey results indicated both the opinions of the parents and the students as they related to the PSAP component of living in an individual room.

In regard to individual residence hall rooms, participants were asked questions in terms of managing stress, self-monitoring, problem solving, and overall benefit. Table 7 indicates the responses of both sets of participants. The results are presented by group and question asked. Questions are being listed before the table to allow perspective.

Student perspective.

- Question 2: Having access to an individual room has assisted me in developing self-monitoring self-awareness skills.
- Question 3: Having access to an individual room has assisted me in building problem-solving skills and self-advocacy skills in a controlled environment while fostering life-long independence.
- Question 4: Overall, I find the individual room a beneficial part of the program.
- Open-ended Question: Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning individual rooms in the residence hall.

Table 7 gives a visual representation of the responses to the questions listed in Student Perspective. Students ($n = 49$) responded to the question regarding managing stress with a mean of 1.63. Three students chose the option of “Not Applicable” to him/her in response to this question. An option to indicate why this was not applicable to them was not offered. Some possible reasons why this was not applicable could be that

the student chose to live with a roommate, chose to live at home, or he/she was living in an apartment on or off campus. The reasoning supplied here applies to all questions listed in this section. On the second question regarding self-monitoring skills, students responded with a mean of 1.70. In regard to Question 3 related to whether living alone in a residence hall assisted with problem-solving skills, students responded with a mean of 1.83. The final question asked the student to indicate if he/she believed the component of individual residence hall rooms was an overall beneficial part of the PSAP program. The students responded with a mean of 1.65. The student participants also were given the opportunity to comment regarding the individual room component following the scaled questions.

Of the 49 students who responded to the survey, five total comments were made regarding the individual residence hall, translating to 9.8% choosing to comment. Four of the five comments made were positive with one comment being off topic. That comment was not considered, as it concerned another component of the program. The positive comments for this area of support were 100%. Student Participant 1 stated that having a room to himself has “proven a great benefit.” Student Participant 9 also commented positively, expressing that “Having a room to myself is one of the best parts of the program.” Although Student Participant 23 no longer has an individual room, he responded by saying that “It was quite beneficial in enabling me to be academically successful, given the relative lack of distractions it provided me.” He went on to say that providing him with the location of other PSAP students may have allowed him to bond more with other students.

Parent perspective.

- Question 1: I find/found the individual rooms helpful in managing stressful situations and anxiety for my student.
- Question 2: Having access to an individual room has assisted my student in developing self-monitoring and self-awareness skills.
- Question 3: Having access to an individual room has allowed my student to develop problem-solving and self-advocacy skills in a controlled environment while fostering life-long independence.
- Question 4: Overall, I find the individual room a beneficial part of the program.
- Open-ended question: Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning individual residence hall rooms.

Parents' responses were measured regarding the Parent Perspective questions. In addition to the student responses, Table 7 shows the responses of the parents in regard to the individual residence hall room component. Parents ($n = 30$) responded with a mean of 1.29 to Question 1, which dealt with managing stress. Two parents indicated that questions regarding individual residence halls were not applicable to their student. A parent could answer in this manner if his/her student was living at home, had chosen to live with a roommate, or was currently living in an apartment on or off campus. The same two participants responded in this way to each question asked for this set of questions. Parents responded with a mean of 1.70 when asked if this component had assisted with self-monitoring skills. On the third question regarding problem-solving skills, parents indicated a mean of 1.46. Finally, the parents were asked about the overall

benefit of this component of the PSAP program. The parents responded with a mean of 1.25.

Table 7

Individual Residence Room Component align columns

| | <u>Managing Stress</u> | | <u>Self -Monitoring</u> | | <u>Problem Solving</u> | | <u>Overall Benefit</u> | |
|----------------|------------------------|---------|-------------------------|---------|------------------------|---------|------------------------|---------|
| | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student |
| Valid | 28 | 46 | 27 | 46 | 28 | 46 | 28 | 46 |
| Missing | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Mean | 1.29 | 1.63 | 1.70 | 1.70 | 1.46 | 1.83 | 1.25 | 1.65 |
| Std. Deviation | 0.60 | 0.93 | 0.78 | 0.99 | 0.64 | 1.04 | 0.52 | 0.97 |
| Minimum | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| Maximum | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 |

After the Likert-scale questions, the parents were given the opportunity to answer one open-ended question regarding access to individual residence hall rooms. The following analysis of the qualitative data is referenced by the number of each participant, followed by their comment to a specific component of support. Of the 30 parents who responded, 13 provided a comment, for a total of 43%. Five of the comments were considered positive (38.4%). Parent Participant 12 stated that, “Having an individual room has been a very important element of success for my child.” Parent Participant 20 indicated “excellent service.” “Not sure how our son would have made it through his freshman year without the single room” was the response from Parent Participant 29. Of the comments made, only one was considered negative (13%). Parent Participant 24 stated, “My child complained about the individual room...wanted a roommate to interact with.” The remaining comments were suggestions and general comments and were not regarded as negative or positive. Parent Participant 6 suggested that a dorm setting with a private bathroom would be helpful. He/she stated the student was intimidated by the

communal bathroom. Parent Participant 10 reiterated the same point, stating that his/her student indicated he/she would often wake up much earlier than needed in order to be first to take a shower. Parent Participant 17 was curious as to whether sharing a room may have been beneficial to his/her student and said it would have required much more help from the PSAP program.

Planned social activities. Social activities were planned each month for the students. PSAP provided a minimum of six socials per month that were organized and supervised by full-time staff. Students within the program must choose to attend a minimum of two planned social events per month. The social events included on- and off-campus activities and varied each month. Examples of these events included but were not limited to eating at various restaurants, trivia nights, game nights, and sporting events. Students and parents were asked questions regarding social activities as they related to social skills and awareness, new experiences, social manners, gaining flexibility, and overall benefit.

Table 8 represents the responses of both student participants and parent participants. As with the previous component, the results are presented by group and by question asked.

Student perspective.

- Question 1: Having access to planned social activities has assisted me in developing social skills and awareness in a natural environment.
- Question 2: Having access to planned social activities has given my student new experiences and gotten me out of my comfort zone.

- Question 3: Planned social activities have helped to improve social interactions and social manners.
- Question 4: Having access to planned social activities has helped me to integrate my social skills into daily life and assisted me in becoming more flexible in my social interactions.
- Question 5: Overall, I find the social activities are a beneficial part of the program.
- Open-ended question: Please list any suggestions or comments concerning socials.

The questions were not given an option of “Not Applicable to Me,” as this component of the program was a mandatory part of the PSAP. Students ($n = 49$) responded to the first question regarding developing social skills and awareness with a mean score of 2.04. They responded with a mean of 2.04 related to social activities helping them to get out of their comfort zone. The students’ mean response related to seeing an improvement in social manners and social interactions, was 1.93. The students’ mean response was 2.04 when answering whether the planned social activities had improved their ability to integrate their social skills into daily life and improved their flexibility. The students overall rated the benefit of the planned social activities with a mean of 1.94.

Immediately following the Likert-scale questions, each student was given the opportunity to respond to an open-ended question. The analysis of the qualitative data is referenced by the number of each participant, followed by his/her comment to a specific area of support. In this case, the following lists the responses of the students. In regard

to planned social activities, four students of the 49 who responded (8.1%) chose to leave a comment. The student comments could be characterized as negative or suggestive.

Student Participant 5 stated:

Not all of those on the spectrum struggle as much as others with being social, and the interests of these individuals vary greatly. Forcing a bunch of people who might not get along or are more emotionally unstable than others makes for an uncomfortable scenario where you feel like you're stepping on eggshells for the sake of people you don't even know or like.

Participant 8 stated the opinion that he/she would like for social activities to be voluntary.

Participant 14 suggested that the times varied, as most socials were offered in the evenings and he/she had many evening classes. The final student who responded was

Participant 23. He stated:

I would have appreciated having more socials that had an explicit social skills development component to them, like the one at the Public Theatre of Kentucky about dating. Perhaps it might be good to coordinate with the theatre department and see what they can come up with, as it is my understanding that one of the other PSAP students has found being involved with theatre to be immensely beneficial in helping him to better understand social cues, body language, etc.

Alternatively, perhaps taking acting/theatre classes should be suggested by PSAP advisors to students wishing to improve their social skills.

As these comments were not necessarily considered positive, they were characterized as suggestions for change or improvements.

Parent perspective.

- Question 1: Having access to planned social activities has assisted my student in developing social skills and awareness in a natural environment.
- Question 2: Having access to planned social activities has given my student new experiences and gotten him/her out of his/her comfort zone.
- Question 3: Planned social activities have helped to improve social interactions and social manners.
- Question 4: Having access to planned social activities has helped my student to integrate his/her social skills into daily life and assisted him/her in becoming more flexible in his/her social interactions.
- Question 5: Overall, I find the social activities are a beneficial part of the program.
- Open-ended question: Please list any suggestions or comments concerning socials.

As was true for the student questions, the Parent Perspective questions were not given the option of “Not Applicable to My Student,” as this program component was mandatory for student participation. In response to the first question, parents answered with a mean of 1.90 related to building social skills and social awareness. The second question related to getting his/her student out of his/her comfort zone; the mean parent response was 1.83. Regarding the third question, improving social manners and social interactions, the parents responded with a mean of 1.93. The fourth question dealt with daily life and improved flexibility. The parents responded with a mean of 1.97. Finally,

parents responded with a mean of 1.87 regarding the overall benefits of the planned social activities of the PSAP.

The qualitative data analysis is referenced by the assigned number of the participant and the comments he/she made concerning the planned social activities component. Comments were left by 16 of the 30 parent participants. This translated to 53.3% who responded with a comment. Of those comments, seven were deemed to be positive comments (44%), three were deemed negative (19%), three were suggestions (19%), and three were unsure (19%). Parent Participant 7 stated that her daughter:

Has had new confidence or skills to plan to see other students on her own, plan to participate in dorm activities, and walk from building to building sometimes on her own or talking to someone on the phone. She has called to use the escort service. And she has had the confidence to walk down the street to visit grandparents on her own when at home. Still, she seems unable to do all of these activities some of the time. But it is growth, I believe, because she really wasn't doing these things before.

Participant 11 responded with the following:

The social activities were critical during that first year to help my student to form friendships and participate in activities on campus. I recall the game night was very important, and other activities, like going to events, tailgating. The trips to Wal Mart were great for my student to be responsible for stocking up on needed items and taking responsibility for his daily needs. Also, some of the older PSAP students also invited the younger guys to their apartments to play games and watch movies, and

this should be encouraged, as it gave my student the true college experience. He looked up to these guys and formed lasting friendships with several of them and, he keeps in touch still. These connections and so important to ensuring the students are enjoying college life, especially in that first year or two.

Finally, Parent Participant 22 stated that his/her child probably would not have come out of his/her room if it were not for the social activities.

Conversely, there were three negative comments regarding the planned social activities. Parent Participant One1 commented that her son “did not feel comfortable at PSAP.” Parent Participant 14 commented that his/her student “did not seem to get very much out of the social activities, and there didn't seem to be enough things my child was interested in attending. With the load of classes, work, study tables, etc. having socials seemed difficult to attend. No downtime.” Parent Participant 6 felt that there were not enough social activities that his/her son was interested in attending. He/she went on to say it was not the fault of the planners; however, he/she would have liked for the student to be required to attend.

Suggestions for improvement also were made by three of the parents. Parent Participant 4 suggested that socials be provided per residence hall. Parent Participant 10 made the suggestion that the socials be “spread throughout the week as they will interfere with classes.” Parent Participants 13, 16, and 29 reflected that they were unsure as to whether this component was helpful to his/her student, as they did not know if they attended.

Table 8

Social Activities Component

| | <u>Skills/Awareness</u> | | <u>Comfort Zone</u> | | <u>Social Manners</u> | | <u>Daily Life/Flexibility</u> | | <u>Overall Benefit</u> | |
|----------------|-------------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|-----------------------|---------|-------------------------------|---------|------------------------|---------|
| | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student |
| Valid | 30 | 49 | 30 | 49 | 30 | 49 | 30 | 49 | 30 | 49 |
| Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Mean | 1.90 | 2.04 | 1.83 | 2.04 | 1.93 | 2.33 | 1.97 | 2.04 | 1.87 | 1.94 |
| Std. Deviation | 0.76 | 0.79 | 0.65 | 0.87 | 0.74 | 0.94 | 0.76 | 0.79 | 0.68 | 0.85 |
| Minimum | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| Maximum | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 |

Focus group perspective. The qualitative data collected from the focus group analysis were presented by speaker number and comments made concerning the planned social activities component. The group consisted of five full-time employees with various roles in the PSAP, including assistant director, assistant program managers, and mental health counseling. A total of six comments were made concerning socials during the hour-long group session. Speaker 1 commented that “knowing they can go out and just have fun. Many of our students struggle with social situations and making social connections and friends. The kind of environment they are in here has really been great for that.” Speaker 1 also commented regarding the benefits to getting more student input on social activities being planned. Speaker 2 stated that getting the students comfortable outside, but also connecting them more to the staff and peer mentors, was a goal of planned socials. He/she also stated that this area of support helped socially and decreased awkwardness and opened the doors to other topics in a natural setting allowing the students to discuss hard topics in a comfortable setting. Speaker 2 reiterated the

suggestion that the staff “get more intentional feedback from the students on things they would like to do.” Speaker 3 felt that it was a strength of the component that nights were offered to play games and not focus on hard topics. He/she also suggested that “more light-hearted and varied activities to decrease social pressures” may assist the students.

Mental health counseling. The PSAP program staff included a full-time mental health counselor who was available only to the students who were accepted as a part of the program. Mental health counseling was not required for every student. Students could choose to seek out these services as needed. Students also could choose to schedule regular therapy sessions, see the therapist as needed for crisis situations, or not be seen at all other than an initial intake meeting. Students and parents were asked questions regarding this component of the program as it related to organization, prioritization, emotional regulation, building social skills, openly discussing mental health challenges, negotiating crisis situations, and overall benefit of the mental health component of the PSAP.

Table 9 represents the responses of both student participants and parent participants. The results are presented by the group and by question asked.

Student perspective.

- Question 1: Having access to mental health counseling has been helpful in assisting me in organization, prioritization, and emotional regulation.
- Question 2: Having access to a mental health counselor has helped me to build social skills and support in a facilitated setting.
- Question 3: Having access to a mental health counselor has helped me to have a forum to openly discuss mental health challenges.

- Question 4: Having access to a mental health counselor within the program has helped me or others within the program to negotiate crisis situations.
- Question 5: Overall, I find the access to a mental health counselor a beneficial part of the program.
- Open-ended question: Please provide any suggestions or comments regarding counseling.

The students ($n = 49$) were given the option of “Not Applicable to Me” when answering these questions, as mental health counseling was not a required part of the PSAP program. In response to the first question regarding organization and prioritization related to mental health counseling, students responded with a mean of 2.17, with seven students indicating that this question was not applicable to him/her. A mean of 2.12 was noted on the second question regarding social skills in daily life and flexibility, with seven students also indicating that this question was not applicable to him/her. Relative to question 3 regarding providing a forum for open discussion, students responded with a mean of 2.0, with seven students indicating “Not Applicable.” The fourth question regarding negotiating crisis situations was answered by students with a mean of 2.27. The number of students who responded “Not Applicable to Me” increased to eight on question 4. On the final question regarding the overall benefit of the mental health counseling component, students responded with a mean of 1.77, with six indicating this was “Not Applicable to Me.”

Following the Likert-scale questions, the students were again given an opportunity to respond to an open-ended question. The qualitative data analysis is

referenced by the number of the participant and the comments he/she made concerning mental health counseling. A total of six students commented regarding this mental health counseling component, for a response rate of approximately 14.2%. The comments were varied, with two of the responses indicating that they did not use the service. Of the two who stated they did not use the service, Student Participant 2 stated he/she thought that many found this service a great help. The second, Student Participant 30, stated, “I feel on-site mental counseling is good for those that need it, but I never personally used it, thus all my answers being ‘not applicable to me.’” However, it is the judgment of the researcher that this comment could be deemed as a positive comment, as he/she felt that it was beneficial to others. Of the six comments made by students, the researcher deemed them 83.3% positive, with one comment being deemed as a suggestion. Student Participant 26 suggested more times be offered to meet with the counselor. The positive comments included:

Student Participant 23 stated:

Personally, I don't know that it is possible for me to understate how important the presence of onsite counseling has been to me, as I have found it to be more beneficial to me than almost any other aspect of the program. The knowledge that there is always someone on-site ready to help me through any emotional crisis certainly provides me a great deal of peace of mind. I'm sure Cassie would readily attest to the substantial progress I've made in a variety of areas in time I've been seeing her.

Student Participant 5 wrote, “While it's been a long time since I've used it, merely knowing I have the option at all times is very reassuring,” and Student Participant 48

commented, “Just continue to be open-minded with other people who go through intense situations in their lives and knowing there is always someone there to talk to them.”

Parent perspective.

- Question 1: Having access to mental health counseling has been helpful in assisting my student in organization, prioritization, and emotional regulation.
- Question 2: Having access to a mental health counselor has helped my student to build social skills and support in a facilitated setting.
- Question 3: Having access to a mental health counselor has helped my student to have a forum to openly discuss mental health challenges.
- Question 4: Having access to a mental health counselor within the program has helped my student or others within the program to negotiate crisis situations.
- Question 5: Overall, I find the access to a mental health counselor a beneficial part of the program.
- Open-ended question: Please provide any suggestions or comments regarding counseling.

The parents were given the option to choose “Not Applicable to My Student” when responding to the Parent Perspective questions, as this component of the program was not mandatory for every student. The data are represented in Table 9. In response to the first question regarding organization and prioritization, the mean parent response was 1.69, with four of the 29 parents indicating that this question was not applicable to their student. In regard to the second question, this area of support in relation to social skills

and support in a facilitated setting, parents responded with a mean of 1.85, with four again indicating it was not applicable to his/her student. Regarding a forum for open discussion of mental health needs, parents responded with a mean of 1.69, with four parents indicating “Not Applicable to My Student.” The fourth question dealt with being assisted in negotiating a crisis, and parents responded with a mean 1.68, with five parents indicating it was not applicable to his/her student. Regarding the overall benefit of the mental health counseling component, parent participants responded with a mean of 1.43, with two indicating “Not Applicable to My Student.”

The qualitative data analysis is referenced by the number of the participant and the comments. Immediately following the Likert-scale questions, parents were again given the opportunity to respond to an open-ended question. Of the 29 parents who responded to the survey, 15 gave a comment regarding the mental health component of support (51.7%). The researcher deemed 66.7% of the comments made to be positive, with 13% negative and 20% being unsure of whether their student had utilized the service. Parent Participant 5 stated, “For my son, this is a strength and the best thing about this program.” Parent Participant 6 responded by saying, “It has been helpful to me to be able to call when I've had concerns and the counselors have both been willing to listen to my child and to help us find additional help when needed.” Parent Participant 8 reiterated by saying that his/her child definitely benefited from working with the counselor and that he/she was thankful the student felt so comfortable with the counselor. Both Parent Participants 12 and 15 responded with the mental health counseling component being beneficial to their students. Parent Participant 29 responded that,

although her son had not taken advantage of this part of the program, he/she was “very glad she is available” in referencing the current staff member who held that position.

The negative comments noted during the analysis were from Parent Participant 1 and Parent Participant 14. Parent Participant 1 stated, “A program of support should be 24/7. If not, it is not a program of support.” Parent Participant 14 stated that his/her son “would not use this service.” The final comments noted that either they were unfamiliar with whether their child used the program, or they stated that their student did not currently take advantage of this area of support.

Table 9

Mental Health Counseling Component

| | <u>Organization</u> | | <u>Social Skills</u> | | <u>Open Discussion</u> | | <u>Negotiate Crisis</u> | | <u>Overall Benefit</u> | |
|----------------|---------------------|---------|----------------------|---------|------------------------|---------|-------------------------|---------|------------------------|---------|
| | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student |
| Valid | 26 | 42 | 26 | 42 | 26 | 42 | 25 | 41 | 28 | 43 |
| Missing | 4 | 7 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 7 | 5 | 8 | 2 | 6 |
| Mean | 1.69 | 2.17 | 1.85 | 2.12 | 1.69 | 2.00 | 1.68 | 2.27 | 1.43 | 1.77 |
| Std. Deviation | 0.79 | 1.23 | 0.83 | 1.15 | 0.84 | 1.19 | 0.80 | 1.34 | 0.69 | 1.00 |
| Minimum | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| Maximum | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 |

Focus group perspective. The qualitative data collected from the focus group again are presented by the assigned speaker number and comment made concerning the mental health counseling component. The researcher noted two comments when analyzing the data, both of which were deemed positive. Speaker 2 stated, “This component of mental health counseling has been very helpful. Not having to refer to campus counseling and having immediate access for students.” Speaker 3 also commented with a positive remark saying, “Having a mental health counselor has cut

down on hospitalizations and those referred to the crisis unit. Being more proactive rather than reactive to mental health issues.”

Study table component. Study tables were described as scheduled/dedicated time that students were within the clinical building for direct study and to work on assignments. Each student was required to attend study tables for a total of 12 hours per week. This time generally was broken down into three hour-long sessions four days per week. The schedule was consistent and predictable from week to week. During this time, students could receive tutoring, assistance with executive functioning skills (problem-solving, prioritizing, organization), and communication. Student employees of varying academic backgrounds and specialties served as staff during the required study sessions. The students also could receive assistance during these hours from administrative staff as needed. This area of support was mandatory for all students who were a part of the PSAP program.

Table 10 represents the responses of both student participants and parent participants. Once again, the results are presented by group and by question asked.

Student perspective.

- Question 1: Having access to scheduled/monitored study sessions is helpful to my academic progress.
- Question 2: The study sessions help me to stay scheduled, prioritize, and problem-solve my classroom assignments.
- Question 3: The study sessions have helped me to gain study skills.
- Question 4: Overall, the study table sessions are a productive part of the program and have helped me to progress toward my academic goals.

- Open-ended question: Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning study tables.

The students ($n = 49$) were not given the option of “Not Applicable to Me” on questions in this section, as this component was required of all students. The students responded with a mean of 1.92 when asked if study tables had assisted them with academic progress. In regard to scheduling and prioritizing assignments, the students responded with a mean of 1.86. On the third question dealing with gaining study skills, students responded with a mean of 2.06. When ranking the overall benefit of the study table component, the students responded with a mean of 1.82.

As with the previous component question sets, following the Likert-scale questions, the student participants were given the opportunity to answer an open-ended question. The qualitative data are again presented by participant number and comments that were made about the study table component of support. Regarding study tables, 10 of the 49 students who responded to the survey left a comment for a percentage of 20.4% of students. Of the 10 comments, two were considered by the researcher to be positive, four were deemed negative comments, three were considered to be suggestions for improvement, and one was considered unrelated. Student positive comments included Student Participant 1 stating, “I greatly appreciate this, having some time to just work out my assignments is incredibly useful.” Student Participant 23 commented:

While I have made a great deal of progress in my ability to motivate and force myself to do assignments for class I may not necessarily want to do, I still find study tables to be enormously helpful because of the generally quiet, distraction-free environment they provide. I have also found it immensely beneficial to have

relatively easy access to people who can help me with more professional documents like resumes and cover letters.

Of the comments made, four of the 10 were considered by the researcher to be negative. Student Participant 5 commented:

Mandatory study tables have been another situation that is incredibly frustrating. For those who need it, I'm sure it's a fantastic resource. For those who have their own area, their own way of doing things, who like working alone, it's miserable. It feels like you're being brought in to be babysit like the socials and less of a resource.

Student Participant 35 stated that he/she was “capable on my own.” The comment from Student Participant 39 stated that he/she felt irritated being called into study tables every day, with Student Participant 34 stating that it can very difficult trying to fit everything into his/her day. The majority of the suggestive comments revolved around tutors who worked within the program. Student Participant 41 stated that he/she would not mind if the tutors asked more about what he/she needed to do. Student Participant 48 suggested that the sessions be more flexible around students’ schedules and that proper tutors be assigned to align with the same majors. The final suggestion regarding study tables was from Student Participant 49, who suggested better communication from tutors. He/she would like tutors to be in contact with previous tutors who worked alongside to understand the best ways to tutor individual students.

Parent perspective.

- Question 1: Having access to scheduled/monitored study sessions is helpful to my student’s academic progress.

- Question 2: The study sessions help my student to stay scheduled, prioritize, and problem solve classroom assignments.
- Question 3: The study sessions have helped my student gain studying skills.
- Question 4: Overall, the study table sessions are a productive part of the program and have helped my student to progress toward his/her academic goals.
- Open-ended question: Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning study tables.

Parents ($n = 30$) responded to questions regarding study table sessions related to their student's academic progress, scheduling and prioritization, study skills improvements, and whether study table sessions were an overall benefit of the PSAP. Table 11 is a visual representation of the results. In response to the first question regarding study sessions and academic progress, parents responded with a mean of 1.27. Regarding the second question and assisting in scheduling assignments and prioritizing, parents responded with a mean of 1.57. Parents responded to the third question regarding a gain in study skills with a mean of 1.59 and ranked the study table component at 1.48 for overall benefit.

Just as the students were given the opportunity to answer an open-ended question regarding study table sessions, the parents also were given this opportunity following the Likert-scale questions. The qualitative data analysis is presented by participant number and comment made concerning the study table session component of the PSAP. The parents commented on 16 occasions (53.3%). The analysis of those comments revealed

that eight of the total comments were considered positive (50%). The researcher deemed that six of the comments made were considered negative, for a percentage of 37.5%. One comment was a suggestion for improvement, with one comment (although complimentary of a current staff member) was unrelated to study table sessions. Parent Participant 8 stated:

I will say the tutors and study sessions have been critical for my student though. The consistency and accountability each day helps them be successful. It's also good for them to know they have someone to rely on every day for help and to ask questions.

Parent Participant 10 said, "Study tables are very important, especially in the first two years." Parent Participant 18 commented that study tables had assisted his/her student in accountability and staying on track. This parent added the comment, "excellent resource." Parent Participant 21 called the study tables session a "huge selling point and a huge part of my child's success." Parent Participant 25 commented that his/her child was "on the Dean's list the first year at the university due to the help of study tables." Finally, Parent Participant 26 commented that study tables "had played a vital role in my student's academic success."

Of the 16 comments made, six were considered to be negative in regard to study table sessions. Parent Participant 5 thought he/she would have seen more benefit if his/her student had tutors who were older and more advanced as the student moved forward in his/her field of study. Parent Participant 9 stated that he/she was unsure how much the staff helped his/her student adjust/develop study skills that worked for the student. Parent Participant 10 commented that his/her student "...has not always had

tutors that could help in the subjects in which he was enrolled. There were times he needed to retake a course and I feel he did not receive enough help during study tables/sessions.” Parent Participant 12 felt that his/her student found study table tedious and would prefer studying alone. Finally, Parent Participant 28 said:

I don't think the tutors/mentors took an active enough role in helping our son with his organizational difficulties. Also, one of his greatest challenges is to approach people for help. So, he didn't. And as a result, he didn't benefit as much from this part of PSAP as we'd hoped.

One suggestion concerning study tables was expressed by Parent Participant 13, who discussed a possible tiered system as the student progressed in the program, decreasing the study times as long as grades permitted.

Table 10

Study Table Component

| | <u>Academic Progress</u> | | <u>Schedule/Prioritize</u> | | <u>Study Skills</u> | | <u>Overall Benefit</u> | |
|----------------|--------------------------|---------|----------------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|------------------------|---------|
| | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student |
| Valid | 30 | 49 | 30 | 49 | 29 | 49 | 29 | 49 |
| Missing | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Mean | 1.27 | 1.92 | 1.57 | 1.86 | 1.59 | 2.06 | 1.48 | 1.82 |
| Std. Deviation | 0.52 | 1.00 | 0.73 | 1.02 | 0.68 | 1.05 | 0.63 | 1.01 |
| Minimum | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| Maximum | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 |

Focus group perspective. The qualitative data collected from the focus group again are presented by the assigned speaker number and comment made concerning the study tables component of the PSAP. The comments that were made by the full-time staff concerning study tables were both deemed positive. Speaker 3 commented that the set schedule for study tables was a strength. He/she went on to say that “Having a

location where they are working and receiving tutoring that is consistent is huge.”

Speaker 4 noted that student worker staff for study tables was a major strength.

Mentoring. Each week a student attended a mentoring group. This group consisted of two mentors and up to four students who attended a planned activity of their interest. These could include events such as dinner, service groups, exercise groups, art groups, or board game groups. The students who were participants in the program were required to attend one mentoring session per week for approximately 60 to 90 minutes. These sessions also were consistent week to week and easily predicted.

Table 11 represents the responses of both student participants and parent participants related to the mentoring component of the PSAP program. The results are presented by group and by question asked concerning the mentoring component.

Student perspective.

- Question 1: The mentoring program has connected me to activities and interests on the university campus.
- Question 2: The mentoring program has provided me with an environment to socialize with peers.
- Question 3: The mentoring program has expanded my college experience.
- Question 4: The skills learned during mentoring activities have helped me to improve my time management and balance schoolwork and leisure time.
- Question 5: Overall having planned activities involving peer mentors is a productive part of the PSAP and has helped me to progress in my social growth.

- Open-ended question: Please list any suggestions or comments concerning mentoring.

Students ($n = 49$) were asked to answer Likert-scale questions regarding the mentoring component. This area of support was a required part of the PSAP program; therefore, the option “Not Applicable to Me” was not given for any of the questions in this set. The mean response of 2.31 was given to the first question on whether mentoring connected the student to activities and interests on the campus. Students responded to the second question regarding mentoring providing an opportunity to socialize with peers at a mean of 2.20. Question 3 related to expanding the college experience, and students responded with a mean response of 2.24; the response to time management was 2.35. Finally, a mean score of 2.18 was given for the overall benefit of the mentoring component of the PSAP.

The qualitative data analysis is referenced by the number of the participant and the comments made regarding the mentoring component. Immediately following the Likert-scale questions, students were again given the opportunity to respond to an open-ended question. Of the 49 students who responded to the survey, four commented on the mentoring area of support, for a percentage of 8.2%. Of the four comments made, one was considered negative, one was considered mixed, one was a suggestion, and the final one appeared to be unaware of the program. Student Participant 5 commented, “Another case of nice to have it if you need it, sucks the life out of your soul and makes you feel like an infant if you don't.” Student Participant 14 stated:

I have not been in mentor groups for the last three semesters, so my responses reflect my experiences from the semesters when I had it. The

biggest benefit that I got out of mentor groups was that it helped me build a few friendships with PSAP's student workers (i.e. the mentors). Those friendships have been very beneficial to me, even after the mentor has graduated and left WKU. I don't think it helped me build friendships outside of PSAP because I have not had much success in making friends outside of PSAP. My experiences with mentor groups did not seem to focus much on skill-building.

This comment had positive aspects but also the student expressed some of his/her negative opinions regarding mentoring groups. Student Participant 48 suggested the mentoring component of the program include "...more opportunities to do more fun things that an individual student to relate to such as sports, card games, and group games."

Parent perspective.

- Question 1: The mentoring program has connected me to activities and interests on the university campus.
- Question 2: The mentoring program has provided my student with an environment to socialize with peers.
- Question 3: The mentoring program has expanded my student's college experience.
- Question 4: The skills learned during mentoring activities have helped my student to improve my time management and balance schoolwork and leisure time.

- Question 5: Overall having planned activities involving peer mentoring is a productive part of the PSAP and has helped my student to progress in his/her social growth.
- Open-ended question: Please list any suggestions or comments concerning mentoring.

Parents ($n = 29$) also were asked to respond to five Likert-scale questions regarding the mentoring component of the PSAP. Mentoring was a required part of the program. The option of “Not Applicable to My Student” was not offered on this set of questions. Table 11 can be referenced for a visual representation of the results discussed in this section. In response to the first question related to mentoring and campus connection, parents responded with a mean of 1.93. When answering the second question regarding mentoring facilitating an environment to socialize with peers, parents responded with a mean of 1.79. The mean response to Question 3 concerning college experience expansion was 1.86. On the fourth question concerning improved time management and balancing work and leisure, parents responded with a mean of 1.97. The overall benefits of the mentoring program as a productive part of the PSAP were given a mean of 1.86.

As with the previously mentioned components and question sets, the Likert-scale questions were followed by an open-ended question. The qualitative data analysis is presented by participant number and comments made concerning the mentoring component. Of the 29 parent participants, 12 chose to comment, at a rate of 41.4%. Of the comments made, four were deemed positive and two were deemed negative. Five of the parent participants commented that they were not aware of whether their student

participated in this component of the program. One comment again was a compliment to a full-time staff member; however, it was not considered a comment concerning this area of support. Parent Participant 5 remarked that his/her student “loves his mentor and trusts him, and he has been a huge asset to him.” Parent Participant 10 commented, “The mentor freshman year was great and very helpful, and again, this extra support was especially important for getting off to a good start and during that first semester.” The peer mentoring component “made my child leave the dorm room in order to attend peer mentoring events or meetings so that is good.”

Parent Participant 1 commented that the university had a problem, and the PSAP program was not accepted and a stigma was attached. Although this comment was not directly related to peer mentoring, the comment was still noted. Parent Participant 13 expressed that peer mentoring was “too much load to put on students when downtime is needed.”

Table 11

Mentoring Component

| | Connected | | Peer Socialization | | Expanded Experience | | Time Management | | Overall Benefit | |
|----------------|-----------|---------|--------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|-----------------|---------|-----------------|---------|
| | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student |
| Valid | 29 | 49 | 29 | 49 | 29 | 49 | 29 | 49 | 29 | 49 |
| Missing | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Mean | 1.93 | 2.31 | 1.79 | 2.20 | 1.86 | 2.24 | 1.97 | 2.35 | 1.86 | 2.18 |
| Std. Deviation | 0.80 | 1.08 | 0.73 | 0.96 | 0.83 | 0.95 | 0.78 | 1.05 | 0.79 | 1.01 |
| Minimum | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| Maximum | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 |

Focus group perspective. The qualitative data collected from the focus group are presented by the assigned speaker number and comment made concerning the mentoring

component of the PSAP. Speaker 2 commented on mentoring by saying, “Staff attending has improved attendance.” Speaker 3 commented that staff planning “has varied the interests and activities.” Speaker 5 commented, “Mentoring has improved. In the beginning, the students were assigned with no choices. Now they have choices.” Finally, Speaker 4 remarked that “having neurotypical peers in the mix is a plus.”

Weekly advisor meetings. The fifth component of the program involved weekly advisor meetings. Each student who was accepted to the PSAP was assigned an advisor (full-time staff member) whose role was to meet with each student on a weekly basis. This meeting allowed the students to receive individual attention to discuss personal matters and review current grades and specific assignment requirements. PSAP advising allowed students to establish a closer relationship with one staff member to increase their communication and comfort level.

Table 12 represents the responses of both student participants and parent participants related to the weekly advising component of the PSAP program. The results are presented by group and by question asked concerning the weekly advising component.

Student perspective.

- Question 1: Weekly advisor meetings have assisted me in problem-solving, organization, and grade monitoring.
- Question 2: Weekly advisor meetings have helped me to improve my written and verbal communication skills.

- Question 3: Weekly advisor meetings have helped me to navigate conversations and communication with professors and the university community.
- Question 4: Weekly advisor meetings give me a safe environment to voice my progress and needs.
- Question 5: Overall, having a weekly meeting with a consistent PSAP advisor is a productive part of the PSAP and has helped me progress in my personal goals.
- Open-ended question: Please list any suggestions or comments concerning weekly advising.

Students ($n = 49$) answered five questions related to meeting with a full-time PSAP employee on a weekly basis. Students responded to the first question concerning weekly advising as it related to problem solving, organization, and grade monitoring, with a mean of 1.71. On the second question concerning improvements in written and verbal communication, the students responded with a mean of 2.04. The mean student response of 1.86 was recorded on Question 3 regarding navigating conversations with professors and others on the campus. On Question 4 regarding a safe environment to voice concerns and progress, the students responded with a mean of 1.63. In response to the overall benefit of the weekly advising meetings, the students responded with a mean of 1.67.

After the Likert-scale questions were answered, the students were then given the opportunity to respond to an open-ended question. The qualitative data analysis is reported by student participant number and comment made about the weekly advising

meetings. The rate of open-ended response was 8.2%. Of the students who commented, three of the four comments (75%) were considered positive, with one being characterized as a suggestion for improvement. Student Participant 5 commented that having a weekly meeting was helpful to him/her. He/she enjoyed having someone to touch base with who was “familiar with the workings” of the university. Student Participant 14 also was complimentary of this area of support. He/she remarked:

Having weekly advising meetings at the beginning of the week has really helped me by giving me a time and space to have questions, concerns, and problems rather than trying to figure out how and when I can track someone down.

The final positive comment regarding weekly advising meetings came from Student Participant 23, who said:

Personally, I have found my weekly meetings with my advisor to be immensely useful for solving problems that are urgent but do not necessarily require me to see a therapist. My advisor has also helped me learn to put together resumes and cover letters, something for which I am very grateful.

Student Participant 36 suggested that upperclassmen should be exempt from meeting with an advisor, as it was his/her opinion they were established enough not to need the service.

Parent perspective.

- Question 1: Weekly advisor meetings have assisted my student in problem-solving, organization, and grade monitoring.

- Question 2: Weekly advisor meetings have helped me to improve my student's written and verbal communication skills.
- Question 3: Weekly advisor meetings have helped my student to navigate conversations and communication with professors and the university community.
- Question 4: Weekly advisor meetings give my student a safe environment to voice my progress and needs.
- Question 5: Overall, having a weekly meeting with a consistent PSAP advisor is a productive part of the PSAP and has helped me progress in my student's personal goals.
- Open-ended question: Please list any suggestions or comments concerning weekly advising.

Parents ($n = 29$) responded to the five Likert-scale questions regarding weekly advising meetings. Results are included in Table 12. This is a mandatory component of the PSAP; therefore, the response of "Not Applicable to My Student" was not listed as an option on this set of questions. Parents responded to the first question regarding assistance with problem solving, organization, and grade monitoring at a mean of 1.38. Parents responded with a mean of 1.62 to the second question regarding both written and verbal communication skills. In regard to assisting with communicating with professors and the university community, parents responded with a mean of 1.48. Parents rated the overall benefit of the weekly advising component of the program with a mean of 1.31.

Immediately following the Likert-scale questions, an open-ended question was asked to give the parents the opportunity to remark with a comment or suggestion. The

qualitative data analysis is reported by participant number and comment made concerning the weekly advising component. Of the 14 comments made, seven were judged by the researcher to be positive (50%), three were considered negative (14.3%), two were suggestions for improvement (14.3%), and three were either unfamiliar or made a comment unrelated to this area of support (21.4%). Parent Participant 2 complimented the weekly advising meeting, stating that he/she saw value in having someone who understood his/her student and was able to offer suggestions when resolving issues that arose and “boosting confidence in the job he does is priceless.” Parent Participant 3 touted this area of support as “the most beneficial service PSAP provides. Invaluable.” Parent Participant 8 said:

It's made a big difference. His advisor has helped him get more comfortable speaking with professors, emailing them, etc. and advocating for himself. My hope is this not only continues but increases next year. These skills help them in the future to write and talk with colleagues, bosses, etc.

The positive comments continued with Parent Participant 17, who stated:

This is the best and most important benefit of the whole program for us. Our son's GPA improved so much by having this tool. It was unbelievable the progress he made. He learned how to advocate for himself more, handle situations that were uncomfortable and learn how to improve his communications with the professors.

Parent Participant 48 reiterated the other comments and stated, “This is the one thing I'm sure kept our son from failing out. The mentor's interactions with our son and the mentor's communication with us were essential.”

Although most remarks were deemed positive, two parents expressed differing views. Parent Participant 9 expressed that he/she wished she “had received the phone calls when my students were having a difficult time in a class and when his grades had fallen below passing.” Parent Participant 15 commented he/she was not sure his/her student was getting the guidance that he/she needed. However, he/she went on to say he/she really did not know. A suggestion was made by Parent Participant 7 that the advisors communicated and stayed in contact with previous advisors to assist in making informed recommendations. Parent Participant 10 suggested that the advisors should be an older student or upper classman. At that point, the service relied on full-time staff to fulfill this role. The final three comments were unrelated to the weekly advising component. One was complimentary of a particular staff, and the other two stated they were unfamiliar with the area of support.

Table 12

Weekly Advising Component

| | Problem Solving | | Communication Skills | | Conversations | | Safe Environment | | Overall Benefit | |
|----------------|-----------------|---------|----------------------|---------|---------------|---------|------------------|---------|-----------------|---------|
| | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student |
| Valid | 29 | 49 | 29 | 49 | 29 | 49 | 29 | 49 | 29 | 49 |
| Missing | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Mean | 1.38 | 1.71 | 1.69 | 2.04 | 1.62 | 1.86 | 1.48 | 1.63 | 1.31 | 1.67 |
| Std. Deviation | 0.56 | 0.74 | 0.71 | 0.87 | 0.73 | 0.89 | 0.69 | 0.83 | 0.54 | 0.85 |
| Minimum | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| Maximum | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 |

Focus group perspective. The full-time staff of the PSAP participated in the focus group to answer pertinent questions about the PSAP program. The qualitative data collected from the focus group are presented by the assigned speaker number and

comments made concerning the weekly advising component of the PSAP. Speaker 2 commented that “Advising is a strength, especially for freshman. It builds a strong bond and person to rely on.” Speaker 3 stated that weekly advising had assisted him/her in better parent communication. Speaker 4 said weekly advising “has helped our students to be more successful and not fall through the cracks.” Finally, Speaker 5 stated, “It’s a time when you can talk with someone and feel safe. There’s no judging and a safe environment.” He/she also suggested that it may be advantageous to “vary these at times as it is possible for students to become too reliant on one person.”

Overall PSAP program. The last set of Likert-scale questions focused on the parents’ and students’ opinions concerning the PSAP program. These were designed to capture a view of how the stakeholders viewed the entire program as a support program as a whole, taking into consideration all six areas of support and the intangible benefits.

Table 13 includes the responses of both student participants and parent participant related to the PSAP program in its entirety. The results are presented by group and by question asked concerning the PSAP.

Student perspective.

- Question 1: The PSAP has helped me to gain independence and self-advocacy skills.
- Question 2: The PSAP has assisted me in improving my communication skills and social skills.
- Question 3: The PSAP has supported me emotionally and mental health well-being.

- Question 4: The PSAP has assisted me in improving vocational skills and preparing for the workplace.
- Question 5: Overall, the PSAP has been effective in assisting me toward meeting my life goals.
- Open-ended question: Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning the PSAP.

Students ($n = 49$) were asked to respond to five Likert-scale questions in response to the PSAP. The questions regarded independence, communication, mental health, vocational skills, and overall life goals. In response to improving independence and building self-advocacy skills, students responded with a mean of 1.80. A mean of 1.82 was noted when responding to Question 2 regarding communication skills. Question 3 asked students' opinions in regard to mental health support; students responded with a mean of 1.61. The students responded with a mean of 1.98 related to the program's assistance in improving vocational skills. The final scaled question concerned the students' opinion as to whether the PSAP had been effective in assisting the student toward his/her own life goals; the mean student response was 1.67.

Following the Likert-scale questions, the students once again were given the opportunity to make a comment concerning the program. The qualitative data analysis is referenced by student participant number and comment made concerning the PSAP program. Of the 49 students who completed the survey, six (12.2%) made a comment regarding the PSAP overall programming. Of these six comments, one was judged to be positive, two were deemed negative comments, and three were suggestions for program improvement or survey improvement.

Student Participant 9 stated, “This program is the only reason I decided to go to college.” The comment from Student Participant 14 was deemed negative; however, it could be characterized as a general comment. He/she stated, “I am not certain how well my vocational skills have been developed.” The final negative comment came from Student Participant 22, who commented he/she “did not feel that the socials are all that convenient as far as time goes.” The suggestive comments came from three students. The first suggestion was from Student Participant 4, whose comment related to the survey. He/she suggested having extended options for gender to be more inclusive. Student Participant 12 suggested more flexible study table time for the students who had proven they could work outside of the PSAP. Finally, Student Participant 48 stated:

I would suggest providing more enhanced assistance for students that go into a major that requires more time out of study table time in order to maintain classwork and projects and maybe set up a specific area of assistance for being in a long classroom session.

Parent perspective.

- Question 1: The PSAP has helped my student to gain independence and self-advocacy skills.
- Question 2: The PSAP has assisted my student in improving my communication skills and social skills.
- Question 3: The PSAP has supported my student emotional and mental health well-being.
- Question 4: The PSAP has assisted my student in improving vocational skills and preparing for the workplace.

- Question 5: Overall, the PSAP has been effective in assisting my student toward meeting his/her life goals.
- Open-ended question: Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning the PSAP.

Parents ($n = 29$) also were asked to answer the same Likert-scale questions regarding the PSAP related to their student; the results are included in Table 13. Parents responded with a mean of 1.41 when answering the first question regarding their student gaining independence and self-advocacy skills. The parents responded with a mean of 1.57 related to communication skill improvements as a result of being a part of the PSAP program. Relative to mental health, parents responded with a mean of 1.41. The mean response was 1.71 for vocational skills. The final Likert-scale question related to the overall PSAP and the program's effectiveness as it related to meeting his/her student's life goals. The parents responded with a mean of 1.57.

As with all six components question sets, the parents were given the opportunity to answer an open-ended question immediately following the set of Likert-scale questions regarding the PSAP as a whole. The qualitative data analysis is referenced by the parent participant number and the comment made concerning the PSAP. A total of 11 parents of the 29 (38%) who responded to the survey made a comment. The researcher's view of the comments deemed that 45.5% of comments were positive; 18.1% of the 11 were negative, and 36.4% provided suggestive comments for future improvements. Parent Participant 6 commented, "Thank you! Please continue to offer this program." Parent Participant 8 stated that his/her student had gained a lot of self-advocacy skills and confidence." Parent Participant 10 wrote:

My family and I will forever be indebted to PSAP and the wonderful staff. The program ensures that a well-rounded college experience, emotionally and academically, is available to a student on the spectrum. The staff cares about their students and this is clear from all that they do. The advocacy that is encouraged by the staff is a tremendously valuable skill. Our student was reluctant to ask for help from professors and others, at first, but became quite skilled at self-advocacy over his time at the university.

Parent Participant 17 remarked:

I love the PSAP program. This program has been such a blessing. I have seen my son grow in leaps and bounds! He still has a lot to accomplish in applying these skills when he is not in school; however, there is such a difference in his behavior from before he went to school to when he has come home. His meltdowns seem to be gone and he is able to bounce back quicker when faced with negative issues.

Positive comments continued with Parent Participant 20, who stated, “I honestly have not worried one day while he was at the university because I knew that he was being taken care of and was in good hands with PSAP!” Finally, Parent Participant 48 said, “So grateful to PSAP. Still very concerned about our son because he continues to lack motivation and direction. But he’s living independent and loving it.”

Other parent comments could be deemed as areas of need. Parent Participant 1 had an overall negative view related to the PSAP. He/she commented:

There needs to be an endorsement from the very top for this program to make it. I noticed the stigma attached to the program during orientation. Because this

program dropped the ball, we lost many options for scholarships at other colleges.

PSAP is basically window dressing on the issue of support. A program of support means someone is there 7 days a week.

Parent Participant 9 commented he/she would have liked more support “in regards to his internships.” Parent Participant 13 commented that PSAP “is a great program.” He/she then went on to suggest the possibility of a parent advisory group and mentioned interest in participating. Parent Participant 5 also made the suggestion of a parent advisory board and was interested in being involved. Parent Participant 12 suggested:

A tiered approach where services are gradually reduced over the 4 years would help to accomplish that. Also, for those who are self-pay, it might make the program more affordable if students are using less services and could perhaps be charged less especially since the program has gone up in price by 67% since we have been in it.

Table 13

Overall PSAP Program

| | <u>Independence/Self Advocacy</u> | | <u>Executive Functioning</u> | | <u>Mental Health</u> | | <u>Vocational Skills</u> | | <u>Overall-Life Goals</u> | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|---------|----------------------------------|---------|--------------------------|---------|------------------------------|---------|-------------------------------|---------|
| | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student | Parent | Student |
| Valid | 29 | 49 | 28 | 49 | 29 | 49 | 28 | 49 | 28 | 49 |
| Missing | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Mean | 1.41 | 1.80 | 1.57 | 1.82 | 1.41 | 1.61 | 1.71 | 1.98 | 1.57 | 1.67 |
| Std. Deviation | 0.57 | 0.82 | 0.57 | 0.86 | 0.63 | 0.84 | 0.71 | 0.99 | 0.63 | 0.83 |
| Minimum | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 1.00 |
| Maximum | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 | 3.00 | 5.00 |

Focus group perspective. The full-time staff of the PSAP participated in the focus group to answer pertinent questions about the PSAP program. No comments were made regarding the PSAP program as a whole.

Overall Benefit of Program

Research Question 2 was, what components of the postsecondary autism program do stakeholders identify as most helpful? This section uses the data collected to answer this research question according to the responses of the stakeholders. Table 14 includes the results from the quantitative data collected. Mean responses for question sets regarding each component of support were collected along with standard deviations.

Student perspective. Students ranked the six areas of support related to being most beneficial to him/her:

1. Weekly advising
2. Study tables
3. Mental health counseling
4. Socials
5. Mentoring program
6. Individual/private residence hall rooms

Table 14

Student Program Ranking

| | <u>Weekly Advising</u> | <u>Study Tables</u> | <u>Mental Health</u> | <u>Socials</u> | <u>Mentoring</u> | <u>Ind. Rooms</u> | <u>Overall Program</u> |
|-------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Mean | 1.78 | 1.92 | 2.06 | 2.12 | 2.26 | 2.51 | 1.78 |
| Std. Deviation | 0.84 | 1.02 | 1.19 | 0.89 | 1.00 | 0.98 | 0.86 |

The final question on the survey gave students the opportunity to answer an open-ended question regarding the area of support they found most beneficial to them. The qualitative data analysis is reported by student participant number and response. A total of 34 student participants responded to this question. Of those who responded, 15 comments were made that indicated study tables were most beneficial to him/her. Mental health counseling was mentioned as most beneficial six times and weekly advising was mentioned five times. Three students commented that socials were most beneficial, while two remarked that mentoring was most beneficial. The other comments included two people noting the whole program as beneficial, with one stating the most beneficial part of the program was talking to someone who cared. It also should be noted that five of those who responded did not select only one component of support. They chose or listed two or more. Student Participant 9 remarked, “All the different areas in this program has significantly improved my college experience.” Student Participant 23 stated, “It would be difficult for me to pick just one area, but the two areas PSAP has [that has] been most beneficial to me would have to be the onsite counseling and study tables.”

Parent perspective. The parent participants’ ranking is reported in Table 15. Mean responses for question sets regarding each component of support were collected along with standard deviations. Parents ranked the six areas of support in this order as they related to most beneficial to his/her student:

1. Individual/private residence hall rooms
2. Weekly Advising
3. Study Tables
4. Mental Health Counseling

- 5. Mentoring
- 6. Socials

Table 15

Parent Program Ranking

| | <u>Individual Rooms</u> | <u>Weekly Advising</u> | <u>Study Tables</u> | <u>Mental Health Counseling</u> | <u>Mentoring</u> | <u>Socials</u> | <u>Overall Program</u> |
|----------------|-------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|----------------|------------------------|
| Mean | 1.42 | 1.50 | 1.51 | 1.67 | 1.88 | 1.90 | 1.54 |
| Std. Deviation | 0.64 | 0.66 | 0.67 | 0.79 | 0.78 | 0.71 | 0.63 |

The final question on the parent survey also gave them opportunity to answer an open-ended question regarding the area of support that they found most valuable. Of 29 who completed the survey, 25 made comments. Study tables received the highest number of comments from eight parents. Weekly advising received the next highest with five comments, followed by mental health counseling with three, individual rooms with two, and mentoring with one comment. Four parents responded with indicators that choosing just one was difficult and regarded the entire program as beneficial. Parents were complimentary and made positive remarks. Parent Participant 8 stated:

I think knowing that the staff really cared about him as a person. It wasn't just his advisor, but the whole staff that always showed through words and actions, that they did care for him, not just academically. They never hesitated to talk with him, offer the support that was needed and reinforced they were there for him. He always knew he had a place to go to everyday for help where people really cared about him.

Parent Participant 7 commented, "It takes all parts of the PSAP coming together for a student." Parent Participant 9 complimented, "The PSAP circle of support

and letting him know that others like himself are able to be successful.” Finally, Parent Participant 10 stated:

Too many to say! Specifically, PSAP teaches self-advocacy skills that a student will use for the rest of his life. Broadly, PSAP makes a successful college experience possible for its students who might not have that on their own. The housing, both the individual dorm room and the apartment with appropriate roommates; the study tables; the tutoring; the counselor; and the first-year essentials: the socials, the network of support, the mentor, the activities - having an entire group of people who have your back and support the students and encourage them during their time in college. Thank you all at PSAP for all you do!

Focus group perspective. The focus group responded to the question, What do you think are the strengths of the program? The theme that emerged from comments made by staff centered on the team atmosphere, the ability for different people to come together with a like goal and accomplish much, and the ability to individualize services for students. Speaker 1 commented on the teamwork aspect and collaboration with Speaker 2, reiterating by commenting, “Good team.” Speaker 2 remarked that, although all the staff were different each with “strengths and weaknesses, at the end of the day, we care about our students.” Speaker 5 commented, “Good to feel like I am actually helping someone.” All those who commented felt a sense of community.

Summary

Opinions, feedback, and reflections from stakeholders and those who were receiving a service were immensely important to assist in adjusting and maintaining a quality and beneficial program. Al-Ibrahim (2014) discussed that quality service is ultimately determined best by meeting the expectations of those who are being served: “Only by satisfying its customers can an organization hope to retain its customer base and indeed expand it for the future” (p. 124). By evaluating the PSAP program, we were able to determine not only current satisfaction, but also how to provide services the stakeholders deemed as quality and beneficial to their life for future adjustments and improvements.

Insights from this chapter included the quantitative and qualitative information obtained through the surveys and questionnaires presented to the students, parents, and five full-time staff members. Chapter V includes a discussion of the findings with recommendations for improvements and additional research areas

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction and Research Questions

This chapter presents a summary of the purpose and the significant findings of this study. The purpose of this study was a program evaluation of the Postsecondary Autism Program (PSAP) offered at a university in the southeastern US. The study attempted to determine how the stakeholders valued the current components of the PSAP program. The program supports students who have been diagnosed with ASD in pursuit of a baccalaureate degree. It has six areas of support, including individual/private residence hall rooms, study tables, social activities, mentoring, mental health support, and weekly advising meetings.

Patton (2003) discussed the program evaluation process and suggested that evaluations should be “judged by their utility and actual use” (p. 223). This program evaluation is key to assist the stakeholders and administrative staff as they continue and improve services for those with ASD who wish to pursue a degree at this university. The student also could provide useful information if other universities also desire to serve and support students in their educational endeavors.

The overarching goal of this study was to analyze, through both qualitative and quantitative methods, the opinions of parents, students, and members of the full-time staff concerning the value of the six components to the PSAP. Three guiding questions gave the direction and approaches for this study. This chapter responds to the three research questions that were the foundation for the study:

1. How do the stakeholders rate the six components of the Postsecondary Autism Program?

2. What components of the Postsecondary Autism Program do stakeholders identify as most helpful?
3. What improvements could leadership make regarding the Postsecondary Autism program?

This chapter is a discussion of the findings of the program evaluation study from the information gathered from the three major stakeholders involved with the programming offered with the PSAP. The research explored the opinions and experiences of the students who were participating in the program, the parents of those students, and the full-time staff members who directly served the students within the program. The chapter includes two major sections: summary of findings related to the data collected and suggestions and implications for future improvements and research.

Summary of Findings

Research Question 1

How do the stakeholders rate the six components of the Postsecondary Autism Program? To evaluate the opinions and feelings of the stakeholders concerning the six components of support, a survey was developed and deployed to parents and students. The questions contained both Likert-scale and open-ended questions, along with requests for demographic information. Descriptive statistical procedures were used to analyze the results of the Likert-scale questions, and comparisons also were made concerning the opinions of each of the two groups. The open-ended questions were recorded and coded. For example, comments were regarded as either positive comments, negative comments, and/or suggestions for possible improvements. Vaismoradi et al. (2016) discussed coding and listed five types of coding that a researcher could use to interpret data. These types

of coding included conceptual code, relationship code, participant perspective code, participant characteristic code, and setting code. The choice of this researcher was participant perspective code, as the survey questions and methods were highly focused on the participants' feelings and opinions about the PSAP components. Participant perspective code was defined as identifying "the participants' positive, negative, or indifference comments about a particular experience" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 103). Following the coding process, thematic analysis was used. Al-hojailan (2012) stated that thematic analysis as a qualitative method can be used to make classifications and to develop patterns. This type of analysis is best used for any study that seeks to draw conclusions using interpretations. It is used to "determine precisely the relationships between concepts and compare them with the replicated data" (p. 40). Thematic analysis was appropriate for this study, as it assisted the researcher in determining and interpreting the data that were consistent with information collected.

A focus group was held to provide full-time staff the opportunity to share their perspectives regarding the program. The information obtained was transcribed and coded and analyzed using a thematic approach to determine themes in responses regarding each area of support. They were again coded for area of support discussed and nature of comment. Salient comments were designated under each component of support and deemed positive, negative, or a suggestion or area of improvement.

Individual/Private Residence Hall Rooms

Student perspective. Results from the survey suggested that the students valued the individual room and felt that it provided benefits beyond privacy. The mean response of the students to this area of support was 1.65. Simply stated, students placed value in

being able to reside alone. They were using language such as “best parts of the program” and “quite beneficial in enabling me to be academically successful.” Residential communities have been noted to have a positive impact on students in many areas including retention, acceptance of those who are different, improving critical thinking skills, and developing as in individual and independent growth (Astin, 1977, 1993; Pike, Kuh, & Gonyea, 2003). Students with ASD present with social difficulties and most often executive functioning deficits as well. Executive functioning skills include “cognitive flexibility, inhibition, sustained attention, distractibility, working memory, and reaction speed” (de Sonnevile et al., 2018, p. 1). Blijd-Hoogeys, Bexemer, and van Geert (2014) also added task initiation, planning, self-regulation, and response inhibition into their description of executive functioning skills. When a student presents with these deficits, it can result in a tumultuous relationship when placed in close living quarters. The PSAP program offers the private residential hall room to give students who are diagnosed with ASD the opportunity to “recharge their social batteries” and to develop their executive functioning skills in a more controlled environment without the pressure of a roommate.

Parent perspective. Parents also found benefit and value in their student’s participation in the private residence living space. Their mean response was 1.25 as the overall beneficial part of the program. This ranking suggests that parents see this in its importance. The demographics demonstrated that 100% of the parents who responded to this survey had either graduated or at a minimum had attended college. Therefore, it was likely he/she had knowledge of the unique skills involved when living with another individual whether known or unknown. His/her background possibly led them to the

conclusion that supplying his/her child with a private residence hall room would be necessary for their success. Therefore, they ranked this area of support as extremely valuable. Each parent also was aware of his/her student's exceptionalities and special needs and had a unique knowledge of the importance of this type of living space.

Planned Social Activities

Student perspective. Social activities are offered to students with the requirement to attend two of the six activities held each month. The planned social activities varied with events such as restaurant outings, hikes, games nights, and sporting events. Astin (1984) proposed the theory of involvement. He stated that a student's involvement in college had a direct correlation to their persistence. He was clear that involvement was directly related to their behavior, not only how they felt about the institution. This theory furthered the idea that social connectedness on campus is key to retaining a student. Walton, Cohen, Cwir, and Spencer (2012) asserted that "among the most powerful human motives is the desire to form and maintain social bonds (p. 513)." They went on to state that the importance of social connections can be shown in health, abilities to self-regulate, and it can influence interests and affect motivation. The social activities required through the PSAP program are based on this premise. There is a need for social engagement for neurotypical students on college campuses, but this holds true for this special population as well. The issue is that many students, especially those with ASD, lack the skills to initiate those activities on their own. Facilitating these activities and assisting with social interactions during the activities can help to increase the connectedness and, in turn, retain that student while increasing his/her social skills. The data indicate that the students found value in these activities. They ranked this

component overall with a mean of 1.94. The data show that the students felt strongly that attending social events had improved their social skills and also caused them to come out of their “comfort zone.”

Parent perspective. The data show that parents held this component of the program in high regard. They felt their child received benefits and that they had improved in social skills, manners, and flexibility in their social behaviors. Parents ranked the overall benefits with a mean of 1.87, which was slightly higher than the student ranking. However, it is believed that parents see through eyes of experience and have a unique view of their child’s progress. Several parents commented that they did not have as much knowledge of this support ,as their son/daughter did not communicate with them about social events. They may have answered the questions positively based on their knowledge of how beneficial it would be for this type of connections to be made while on a campus. The qualitative data also support the importance of social activities, as parents indicated that their son/daughter may have never left their room were it not for planned events. Another parent indicated that the service was critical for their student, especially the first year as their student became acclimated to campus.

Focus group perspective. The focus group data also revealed that they were satisfied with the social programming offered with the themes that presented during the analysis as: comfort, environment, feedback without judgment, less social pressure. The full-time staff regarded this area of support highly. The staff overall considered that the students were able to have fun in a comfortable environment without the fear of judgment and receive constructive feedback regarding his/her social interactions in a safe environment.

Mental Health Counseling

Student perspective. Vasa (2019) estimated that as many as 40% of children and adolescents with ASD have a co-morbid mental health disorder such as anxiety or depression. This statistic alone is startling and justifies the need for mental health services for those who are a part of the PSAP program. Through data collected in spring of 2019, it was found that 35.4% of students who were enrolled in the PSAP program used this service. Although students overall found the service beneficial, they rated this slightly lower than some of the other services offered. This could have been due to the fact that many students did not seek out the service at that time and had marked neutral on their survey. The students marked higher that having a mental health counselor on staff had helped them to feel they could discuss mental health more openly. An overall benefit ranking with a mean of 1.77, indicating strongly agree to agree, was noted. Before the full-time counselor was hired for those within the program, the students were referred to the campus-wide counseling staff. Although this staff was capable and accommodating to the students within the program, the timetable for the student being seen often was not immediate. The students who answered this survey were not, for the most part, in the program during that time and were lacking the ability to compare it when a counselor was not immediately available to him/her. The students who currently used the service found the service immensely beneficial, with one student stating that for him/her, it had been the most beneficial part of the program by providing him/her support and emotional “peace of mind.”

Parent perspective. The data also demonstrate that parents found value in this component of support. As with the previously discussed areas, parents ranked the

support slightly higher than the students. However, both deemed it positive. Parents felt that the support was invaluable for those who were in need of the service. Some parents were not clear on whether his/her child used the service regularly or at all. For those who took the survey, they regarded it highly. The researcher's opinion was that the knowledge that the service existed was comforting to parents. They rated the overall benefit to the PSAP with a mean of 1.43 ,which was in the strongly agree to agree area.

Focus group perspective. The focus group had the unique knowledge of service before the mental health component was offered. It was noted during this group that there had been a decrease in those being referred to crisis units or hospital stays as a result of mental health difficulties. They also felt that having immediate access to a professional was a direct link to the decrease in mental health crises. This decrease also could be due to employing a mental health counselor who had training and familiarity with ASD. Staff also rated this component of support highly.

Study Table Component

Student perspective. Study table component was a scheduled time for students to study and receive specific academic, communication, and executive functioning support. Each student was scheduled for 12 hours per week, which was consistent and predictable. This area of support was required, and this researcher deems this a cornerstone or key component of the program. Students again ranked this component highly, with a mean score of 1.82 for overall benefit. Although students made some suggestions for improvements or change, they saw the overall benefits and appeared to recognize their need for support.

Parent perspective. It came as no surprise that parents would rank this area of support highly. Parents are generally the source of financial support and have the ultimate goal of his/her student being able to be gainfully employed and holding a degree in exchange for his/her said support. The parents ranked the study table component with a mean score of 1.48. This translated to a strongly agree to agree ranking. Parents commented that the study table had played a vital role in their student's success and that it was a huge selling point when looking at programs. Suggestions for improvement are discussed later in this chapter.

Focus group perspective. The full-time staff also voiced a strong belief in the study table component. One staff member felt the student worker staff was the major strength for study tables, which was echoed by other members of the group. The consistency and the scheduling also were noted as positive and found to be a considerable strength. Again, suggestions for improvements and adjustments are made later in this chapter.

Mentoring

Student perspective. Mentoring within the PSAP has gone through many transformations. When the program started, each student was placed with one mentor who met with them weekly. Student attendance and value of the service declined. Following this decline, the mentoring program placed three to four students with one mentor, whose role was to help connect the students to the campus and guide them as they found their areas of interests. Again, a decline in students who used the service was noted. Currently the mentoring program is offered in a hybrid manner. Several students are placed with one mentor and, through current social media methods and group

messaging, meet at their discretion and in their own timing. Second, peer tutors have been infused into the social activities to allow the peer mentor aspect to be a part of those activities, as well in hopes of increasing participation. Rudick and Dannels (2019) noted the importance of mentoring in higher education. They stated that “mentoring is a key component in the socialization process for individuals into an institution, providing them with a guide to accruing the cultural and social capital” (p. 128). Research is clear on the importance; however, is unclear on exactly the best methods of practice. The data were somewhat surprising because, although the mentoring component had gone through many changes, the students continued to rank it an overall beneficial part of the program.

Parent perspective. Parents continued with their positive responses to the program components. They ranked this area of support with a mean of 1.86, placing value in assistance from a mentor. “Students within mentoring relationships, by receiving mentors’ time, attention, and advice, can find success that actualizes (or even exceeds) their talents” (Kyle & Rudick, 2019, p. 128). The goal of the mentoring program with the PSAP was to do just exactly that—connect and assist students in meeting his/her own goals.

Focus group perspective. As previously noted, the mentoring program has gone through transformation. The consensus of the group was that the program has improved. One staff member noted that giving the students choices as to activity could improve the mentoring program. Having full-time staff also attend the social/mentoring activities had increased attendance. All felt that the addition of neurotypical peers added value to the part of the program.

Weekly Advising Component

Student perspective. The weekly advising component of the program was the most recently added aspect. This part of the program began in fall of 2018 as the program's growth was forcing some changes to make sure that quality service continued. The three assistant program managers and the assistant director have students divided and under his/her caseload to meet with and discuss any academic, emotional, social, or any other needs once per week. This meeting, however, does not limit itself to needs. It can serve as a time of reflection, celebration, or a time of complete honesty. This component is closely related to the mentoring program. The difference is the change from a peer mentor to an adult professional mentor. There is great value in both of these relationships. The students ranked this component of support with one of their highest marks at 1.67, translating to "Strongly Agree" to "Agree" on the Likert scale.

Parent perspective. Once again, parents were pleased with the weekly advisor meeting component. They ranked this area of support with a mean of 1.31 for overall benefit, making it one of the most important aspects of the program in their opinions. It would appear by the comments and the ranking that parents understood the value in an individual meeting for their student and the privacy and personal nature this meeting afforded their student.

Focus group perspective. Before this component was initiated, full-time staff felt it was easy for students to "fall through the cracks." The number of students enrolled grew and it became difficult to supply personal service. The weekly advising program dramatically changed each advisor's personal knowledge of his/her students. The staff also felt that it gave the students a safe place where there was "no judging and a safe

environment.” Overall the staff found this area of support an extremely beneficial part of the PSAP.

Research Question 2

What component of the Postsecondary Autism Program do stakeholders identify as most helpful? The data used to answer this question came from a compilation of the data in the Likert-scale survey while also considering the qualitative supporting data. The rankings were determined by compiling the mean of all Likert-scale questions answered by the parents and the students while also considering the comments made in the open-ended questions and focus group transcriptions. The results are presented by each group in the following section.

Student perspective. The quantitative data showed that the students most valued the weekly advising meetings, with study tables ranking at a close second. The results were as follows:

1. Weekly advising
2. Study tables
3. Mental health counseling
4. Socials
5. Mentoring program
6. Individual/private residence hall rooms

The qualitative data somewhat supported this ranking. Of the 34 students who responded to the open-ended question regarding the area of support the student found most beneficial, more students responded with a comment of study tables. However, five did not choose one particular component but were complimentary of the entire program,

suggesting that they found great value in the program as a whole. Surprisingly, the data showed that private residence hall rooms were ranked last to the students. It can be noted that the mean scores were all very close, also supporting the premise that the students valued the program in its entirety.

Parent perspective. The quantitative data showed that parents most valued the individual/private rooms, with the weekly advising and study tables following very closely. The rankings were as follows:

1. Individual/private residence hall rooms
2. Weekly Advising
3. Study Tables
4. Mental Health Counseling
5. Mentoring
6. Socials

The qualitative data from parents also somewhat supported the quantitative data. When specifically asked to respond in a written manner to an open-ended question, more parents responded with the study table component than the private room component, with weekly advising closely behind with three less comments. It was noted by the researcher the stark difference in the ranking of the individual/private residence hall according to parents and students, with parents placing this area of support at most important and students giving it a rating of last. This could be explained by the fact that all parents who participated in the survey had attended college. Therefore, they may have had knowledge of living spaces in higher education. The parents possibly had lived with a roommate and/or had more experience or knowledge of the skills involved with co-living spaces.

The parents also had a deeper and more intimate knowledge of his/her student and their specialized needs. Having experience and more knowledge may have precipitated the parents giving a higher ranking to the private room component. In contrast, students entering higher education likely never have lived with a roommate and due to the component of the program still have not had that experience. Therefore, he/she may not have fully understood the benefits to him/her.

All three of the components were very closely rated with only a slight difference in the mean responses. This could be said, however, of all six areas of support. The rankings were from the highest being a 1.42 to the lowest being a 1.90. These numbers would suggest parents also found the PSAP program overall beneficial to his/her student success.

Focus group perspective. The focus group question regarding support offered differed slightly from that which was the most beneficial component of the program to comments made regarding the program's strengths. The full-time staff felt that overall the biggest strength came in the team atmosphere and the coming together of people from many different backgrounds and experiences who had the heart and desire to serve others. Andrew Carnegie spoke of teamwork when stating, "Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results."

Research Question 3

What improvement could leadership make regarding the Postsecondary Autism Program? One of the most important roles of a leader is to "make improvements in the

area in which they lead” (Morison, 2018, p. viii). Morison added that it is the job of those who lead to provide vision and to shape the directions for the future. This section identifies possible improvement that leadership could consider based on the data collected in this study.

Individual/private residence hall rooms. Viewing this area of support, based on the data it does not appear that changes are needed. Leadership could consider stressing during the interview session and communication following the acceptance into the program that he/she has the option to forego this area of support and choose a roommate. Second, the program could educate the family and the student regarding other living options on the campus, such as the living/learning communities. The program also could make sure the incoming students oblige him/herself of any accommodations needed to meet the requirements of the ADA to ensure his/her individual living needs are being met.

Planned social activities. The suggestions for improvements from the stakeholders primarily centered around variation of the activities offered and variation in time being offered. The improvements that could be made at this time may involve each staff member choosing an activity and communicating with each other about the activities chosen. The staff also would need to talk with each other to vary times and dates of socials. The addition of a set number of weekend events to engage students during off time could prove to be beneficial, although not directly supported by the data.

Study tables. Although the data showed that this area of support was very valued, the stakeholders commented on suggested improvements. Some of those suggestions included a tiered system as the students matriculate through their studies at

the university, directly teach study skills, and show more flexibility in scheduling. Adjustments that could be made may include becoming more individualized. The tiered system of juniors and/or seniors decreasing time could be an excellent suggestion; however, for some that would not be an option. One of the goals of the study table time is to develop a more independent student, one who can manage on his/her own without direct support. However, to say that independence has been reached at the junior level for all students would not be presumptuous. This adjustment of time could be made with negotiation based on skill, grades, and ability to self-advocate and work independently with the PSAP advisor. Instead of a set tiered system, an individualized approach to the time needed to maintain current performance could be a better approach.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), approximately 45% of high school seniors feel prepared for college. Although the statistic currently does not exist concerning those with ASD, it would not be a leap to say that number is significantly lower. The PSAP could offer a course in study skills to all incoming freshmen to serve as a “jump-start” for those study skills. A partnership could be developed with the literacy center to have a one-hour course for all those involved with the PSAP to take their first or, at the latest, second semester to specifically teach study skills. The previously stated statistic demonstrates that most students could use these skills. It is doubtful those with ASD would be any different.

The full-time staff’s suggestions for improvement were mostly related to assisting the students to increase vocational skills and career readiness skills. Being more intentionally focused on the end goal of not only degree completion, but also on meeting his/her job goals following graduation. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2016)

estimated that only 16.8% of individuals with disabilities were employed compared to 65% of individuals without disabilities. Focusing on vocational skills and needs in a more intentional way could help to close that gap for those receiving services through the PSAP.

Limitations

Limitations, as defined by Creswell (2012), are weaknesses or possible problems that could be encountered through the study that the researcher cannot control. This research could lack strength, in that the researcher is directly involved with the support services being offered. This direct involvement could potentially lend itself to bias, as the participants may have been hesitant to share their views.

The study also was limited by the perspectives and the perceptions of participants and their willingness to honestly and openly share their opinions, satisfaction, and suggestions for improvement. The views and attitudes of the parents may have been limited, as some may not have been as aware of the extent and value of the services being offered to their student participants.

Implications for Practice

With the rise in prevalence of ASD and the continuing rise in those who desire to attend postsecondary institutions, it is important that support services be offered, and the stakeholders involved see these services as beneficial. The data overwhelming demonstrated that those who were participating in the program, the parents of those individuals, and the full-time staff were satisfied with the overall programming being offered through the PSAP. Both student and parent rankings demonstrated overall satisfaction with the program ($M = 1.78$ and $M = 1.54$, respectively). These scores

indicate that both students and parents were highly satisfied with the PSAP overall. The scores are both commensurate with strongly agree to agree that the program is key to the student's success. However, improvements and adjustments should always be considered, as with every new group of students come all new challenges and varied needs. This section outlined and discussed those adjustments that leadership could deem productive and feasible.

The program requirement for students to log 12 hours of time studying within the clinical building was based on the general rule that most successful students require three hours of study time per week outside of class per three-hour course. Approximately 50% of those students receiving services through PSAP were enrolled in 12 hours of study. There were approximately 22% who were taking a lesser course load and 28% who were taking more than 12 hours of course load. Using this rule, each student would need 12 hours outside of class to complete homework and study. A consideration for altering this component would be to include a system that is individualized based on each student's needs in order to improve current programming and student success. Limited empirical research exists relating to study time and academic success, with even less research on those with ASD. Nonis and Hudson (2010) found there was not a significant relationship between time spent studying and academic performance. The study indicated less of a correlation between time spent studying only and more of a link to demographics such as gender, motivation, and study habits. Therefore, a reasonable argument can be made that individualizing the study schedule to suit the specialized needs of each student may lead to increased student academic success. Implementing a system that monitors each student's progress based on GPA, current grades, as well as considering medicine

routines and students' general motivation to determine amount of guided study time could be advantageous and lead to increased student focus. The system also could be monitored and reevaluated each semester.

Second, based on the data, vocational and career readiness is an area that could be bolstered within the program. This was indicated through parent data and focus group comments. Lee and Carter (2102) stated:

A meaningful career can contribute to a person's sense of accomplishment, self-worth, and confidence; promote independence and self-determination; provide a venue to share strengths and talents in ways that are valued by others; lead to new friendships and supportive relationships; and offer deeper connections to and engagement in larger community. (p. 988)

Program administrators could begin the process of ensuring interest, degree, and vocational alignment are considered in several ways. Job opportunities following graduation can be very scarce for those individuals with ASD. Lee and Carter also indicated that only 37.2% of individuals in his study were employed and, of those, they averaged only 24.1 hours per week at a pay rate of \$9.20 per hour. To begin to combat the unemployment or underemployed trends, program administrators could take several measures. First, students could be required to take an assessment after acceptance into the program and before coming to campus to give indicators of interest and possible areas of strength. Several assessments could be used. However, this researcher recommends the You Science™ assessment that uses brain games to discover natural talents, aptitudes, and interests. It would supply the students with an extensive report to allow the student, the program, and the parents to choose their direction with a clearer picture. This also

would give the students information concerning their interests and aptitudes to guide the degree choice aligned with their vocation.

A second way the PSAP could adjust would involve focusing on vocational and career skills by requiring all incoming student to participate in a Career Success and Sustainability Program (CSSP). The language program is based on building communication skills and life skills to assist students in becoming better communicators and, in turn, increase employability skills. Each incoming student would participate in this programming once per week for 45 minutes for 10 weeks.

Third, a summer boot camp could be developed to focus specifically on building vocational, career, and interviewing skills. The summer programming could include a week of workshops focusing specifically on, but not limited to resume development, interviewing, proper attire, and workplace communication. The summer camp would allow students within the program to practice these skills in a safe environment with professionals trained in ASD. They would leave the experience with resumes and a plethora of skills to assist them as they obtain gainful employment. Last, the program could be more intentional with internships and maximizing those opportunities for the students within the program. Internships are essential for students, and those on the spectrum are not exceptions to that rule. The difficulty with this idea could involve the amount of time and resources that would be needed. However, initially there are ways to access the resources on the campus itself. Program leaders could work to build relationships with other departments on campus that would be willing to provide these internship opportunities.

Ashbaugh et al. (2017) indicated that social difficulties and delays can “create specific barriers to successful outcomes in the transition phase to adulthood” (p. 1). The social barriers and delays could have a significant impact on a student’s success in higher education. Therefore, organizing social events and activities for those students within the program can be critical to their growth and continuation with their educational experience. The data indicated that some improvements are needed in the planned social activities component of the program. Currently, the number of socials seems to be satisfactory to those involved with the PSAP program. However, several salient comments were made regarding varying times and activities. The staff could provide a calendar of events, along with the activity chosen, to assist with communication and to ensure varied dates and times are used. A survey of preferred or suggested events could be sent to all students, allowing them ownership in the activities being planned. Last, the staff could hold a discussion in the bi-weekly meetings to again ensure variation. These minor changes may result in increased student participation.

A fourth implication for change or improvement could involve the addition of a parent group. Cole, Kharwa, Khumalo, Reinke, and Karrim (2017) found that parents of children diagnosed with ASD experience stress levels well beyond those with children who are developing typically. They reported that support from other parents could assist these parents with resources and service coordination. Munn-Guddings and McVicar (2006) found that “parents who attended a social support group gained empathy, emotional coping, experiential knowledge, practical information, and peer/support friendships” (p. 27). This addition to the program could be accomplished in many forums. A survey could be sent to parents to determine their preferred mode of

interaction and communication. Ideas may include a private social media group, a face-to-face meeting time, or a designated meeting time by a visual computer program such as Skype™ or Zoom™. Face-to-face meetings could be problematic, as it is customary for students within the program to be from different areas in the state as well as several other states. With the rising use of technology, these groups are feasible. The program must explore the technological options and educate parents regarding the opportunity and importance. Initiating this group should first involve a survey to identify those parents who have interest in an online format of communication with other caregivers whose students are enrolled in the program.

To test the waters, a small group could begin meeting once per month to see whether the concept would “take off.” After a 16-week trial (the usual number of weeks in a semester), an informal evaluation could assess the effectiveness and the opinions of those who were involved. Guidance during these sessions would be required initially to give structure. However, my vision would be for parents to be able to meet without the program administrators. The leadership of the parent group would be assumed by a parent who showed the willingness and the desire to head the group. The group could then initiate the discussion topics and seek out those professionals or program administrators to join for educational purposes on an appointment or session basis. I do not envision this as a time for parents to inquire or discuss individual situations with their PSAP advisor. This time should be a connection between those parents and families with like experiences to connect and share in a safe and supportive environment.

Parent/family engagement in the life of a college student is important. It is my opinion that the relationship is needed especially for those who are attending college and have a

diagnosed disability. A few factors to consider would be the student's feelings about the parent level of involvement. Regarding the PSAP program, this subject has been discussed frequently. We speak with students initially and on an ongoing basis about disclosure of information to parents, and we obtain written permission on many occasions because our goal is for our students to improve their independence skills and to gain their own sense of adulthood. However, in my experience, the parent continues to be their main support system in many cases, and communication with them can lead to improved skills. Keeping an open dialogue with the students is crucial.

Another factor could involve the group feeling as though their discussions or suggestions would immediately be implemented. Educating this group on their role and assisting them in developing goals would be a first step in creating a productive parenting organization. My initial goals for the group would include providing parents with a voice and education through their students' transitions, receiving encouragement and sharing information for their own growth and knowledge, and planning for improved life outcomes for their student with the help of those with similar life experiences. The data suggest that parents desire this type of communication. Initializing, organizing, and then transferring leadership to a parent would give them the voice and the opportunities they so richly desire.

An ongoing, systematic plan for continued assessment of the program strengths and needs would be developed. A plan to reduplicate the program evaluation completed for this study and to expand upon the questions and methods used would be beneficial to program growth and student success. Ongoing evaluation is essential to the continued satisfaction of stakeholders. The plan could include a survey that would accompany the

request for deposit that is sent to parents. A student survey, coupled with small group or focus groups, could be conducted on a yearly basis, with data compilation and analysis determining direction and future goals.

An opportunity for growth of the program could certainly exist under the right conditions. With the current staff size and building size, the number of students served within the program is at capacity. However, the need for growth exists with rising numbers of ASD prevalence and also is based on the number of interest meetings and applications received over the last three years. Approximately 30% of individuals who either seek out information or are interested are turned away or are interviewed and placed on a waiting list. There has been a rise in interest and applicants since 2017. The program inquiries have grown by 50%, justifying consideration for growth. However, expansion would require additional space and staff to continue the current programming quality. A proposed timeline for expansion may be five years to a capacity of 75 students. The first two years would be spent searching, obtaining, and refurbishing suitable space. An additional assistant program manager and an additional mental health counselor would be needed. The expansion could involve increments of five for three years, ending with a maximum of 75 students. Although serving more students is positive, additional students could cause the program to lose the individualism that currently is offered to students. The PSAP program would need to ensure the same level of quality service is provided to the students and families.

I not only feel that this growth could occur, I also feel it should grow to meet the demand. Again, not growth simply for the sake of growth, but to serve a population in which the diagnosis rate is growing at a rapid pace. Would that be difficult based on the

current six components? It would put a strain on the current staff. However, the addition of an assistant program manager responsible for 15-20 students could relieve some of that load. The added students also would add to the caseload of the mental health counselor. As of the timing of the data collected, approximately 51% of the students being served within the program were receiving mental health counseling in some form. Simply by those estimates, it would suggest that seven to 10 more students would seek out counseling, which could put a strain on this component of the program both in terms of the student's satisfaction and the counselor's ability to effectively serve each student. Therefore, I predict the addition of a second counselor would be necessary to meet the needs of the students enrolled.

Growth of the program also would indicate a growth in the number of students scheduled for study tables. Could our current space manage that type of growth? The answer I would give would be a resounding, "No." The program must be diligent in acquiring space and/or consider the option of using multiple spaces on the campus (e.g., spaces within the student union, the library, the media center, or other spaces on campus where study room may be available). I personally am concerned with this model of service provision, as the logistics would be difficult to manage. Additionally, I am concerned that the students and student workers would have limited supervision from full-time staff, as well as limited access to full-time staff. The personal contact each student receives is considered a strength of the program; moving the study table component around the campus could limit the personal relationship developed with the students involved in the program. Therefore, obtaining a space within or very close to

the campus where students received their tutoring/mentorship in one location would be optimal.

It would be important for conversations and planning to occur with departments on campus to ensure the university can continue to offer current levels of care and services as the program grows. For example, could the university support and continue to offer the individual/private room benefit if the program continued to add students? I have had discussions with the department relative to growth and predictive numbers. The university has been committed to the PSAP program and could sustain and support 75 total students, but growth beyond that number would push the limits and put a strain on the staff in housing to supply single rooms. A second department to consider when discussing growth is the Student Accessibility Resource Center. The students within the PSAP program are registered with the disability service on campus. A discussion would be needed with that department to ensure they have the needed resources and staff to support additional students receiving their service. Many factors should be considered in order to achieve this goal for the program. However, it is my belief that with proper planning and structure, the growth could be achieved within three to five years, thus giving more students with ASD the opportunity to receive the necessary support to achieve their life goals.

Recommendations for Future Research

As a result of this study, many potential future research opportunities could be explored. First, this research design could be used and repeated on a yearly or biennial basis to receive feedback on the components of the PSAP. The future studies could determine future programming with areas for growth and areas that have been beneficial.

Second, a longitudinal study could be completed using students diagnosed with ASD who are receiving services through the PSAP program, as well as students who are attending the university with the same diagnosis but not receiving services. The variables may include such factors as GPA, retention, his/her connectedness to campus or community, and housing concerns.

An outcome/impact evaluation study could be considered to ascertain more concrete program outcomes. According to Mertens and Wilson (2012), an outcome evaluation focuses on short-term objectives; an impact evaluation pertains primarily to long-term results. Evaluators begin with key questions pertaining to their projected or desired outcomes to determine the scope of the study. The answers could provide such information as student retention rates, degree completion rates, types of degrees earned, students who were accepted into advanced degree programs, job placement, and job placement related to degree obtained. The information gathered in such a study would be immensely helpful in providing stakeholders with program efficacy information and in improving student recruiting practices.

Summary Statement

A significant rise in the prevalence of ASD has been noted in recent years. The NHSR showed prevalence at one in 45, demonstrating a 15% increase just since 2014 (Baio et al., 2018). Institutions of higher education must prepare for these individuals as they age and desire to matriculate into postsecondary settings. The PSAP program at a university in the southeastern US is attempting to answer the call to be prepared and to assist these capable individuals as they work toward meeting their academic, social, communication, emotional, and vocational goals. This study was an evaluation of the

current programming and components offered through the PSAP program. The study indicates overall that the stakeholders deem the program beneficial and indicates the need for this service for students with ASD is paramount for student success.

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APPENDIX A: Logic Model Template

Problem Statement: An increasing number of individuals with an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis are seeking post-secondary education and supports are needed to assist these individuals in reaching their educational and vocational goals.

Program Goals:

1. Foster Independence, self-advocacy and autonomy
2. To support students toward their academic success, graduation, and meeting their own personal goals (education/vocational) – self actualization
3. To prepare students to be equal competitors in the workforce
4. To assist students in developing and improving soft skills (communication, reading body language, interpersonal skills).
5. To assist in developing executive functioning skills (organization, problem solving, and prioritizing, task analysis/completion)
6. Create an environment where students feel respected, promotes learning, promotes maturity, and is safe and free of judgement.
7. Assist students in applying social skills in a variety of settings (campus, community, KAP, peer relationships, etc.)
8. Developing and maintaining lifelong friendships and relationships
9. Supporting students in reaching emotional and mental health well-being.
10. Provide the opportunity to promote stress free living in university and residential settings.
11. Fostering an inclusive environment for students' opinions and thoughts to be heard.

Resources

What resources do we have?

Associate Director, Apartment Coordinator, HRL Staff, Hall Directors, KAP Advisors, KAP Administrative Staff, Student Workers, KAP vehicles, Clinical Education Complex, University Shuttle, BG GO bus, WKU IT, SARC, KAP day phone, email addresses, KAP office phones, planners, Counselor offices, Interns through various departments, KAP mental health counselor, CEC Advisory Board, WKU campus faculty staff, KAP meeting spaces

| <p>Activities What happens in our organization?</p> | <p>Outputs What are the tangible products of our activities?</p> | <p>Short-Term Outcomes What changes do we <u>expect</u> to occur within the short term?</p> | <p>Long-Term Outcomes What changes do we <u>hope</u> to see over time?</p> |
|---|--|--|---|
| <p>Individual/Private Room</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supply an individual room at the same cost as having a roommate (optional) • Partnership with Housing and Residence Life • Training RA's & Hall Directors • Strategically Placing/Partnering to place students appropriately • Direct access to advisors (KAP) to problem solve/advocate social situations that occur in residence halls • Possible access to apartments after 60 hours • Assist with roommate or offer living arrangements when transitioning to apartments (Campus) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of Individual rooms • # of HRL Trainings • # of Advisors, # of Advisor meetings • # of Apartments | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A place for students to escape overwhelming situations or stressful sensory situations • ability to develop living situation in a controlled environment • Increased understanding/awareness concerning ASD for HRL Staff (RAs/Hall Director/Support Staff) • Relaxed stress/anxiety • Provides a transitional living environment for students to acclimate for shared social living environment • Provide a controlled environment to build critical thinking, problem solving, and self-advocacy skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hope • Increase self-awareness and self-monitoring strategies • Identifying with community • Community awareness and shared acceptance long term • Students identify and maintain a roll in their community • Fostering Lifelong independent living skills |

| <p>Activities What happens in our organization?</p> | <p>Outputs What are the tangible products of our activities?</p> | <p>Short-Term Outcomes What changes do we <u>expect</u> to occur within the short term?</p> | <p>Long-Term Outcomes What changes do we <u>hope</u> to see over time?</p> |
|--|--|--|---|
| <p>Planned Social Activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan and facilitate social activities for students to participate • Community and University partnerships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of socials each month • Different variations of socials offered to students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help increase social awareness and social skills in a natural environment • Develop pragmatic social language skills • Developing proper social manners • Fostering an environment where peers can appropriately socialize with peers • Giving back to the WKU and Bowling Green community • Getting students out of their comfort zone • Developing new experiences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly encouraging the building of a better social life for students while in college and beyond • Naturally integrate generalization to daily life • Build confidence to choose and maintain their role in their community • Community awareness and shared acceptance long term • Leave KAP with more flexibility regarding social interactions • Departing KAP with an open mind and desire on various community activities |

| <p>Activities What happens in our organization?</p> | <p>Outputs What are the tangible products of our activities?</p> | <p>Short-Term Outcomes What changes do we <u>expect</u> to occur within the short term?</p> | <p>Long-Term Outcomes What changes do we <u>hope</u> to see over time?</p> |
|---|--|---|--|
| <p>Mental Health Counseling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing Mental Health Support for our students • Provide S-vision • Intake Meetings • Assessments • Optional additional meetings as needed • Focus Groups • Provide advice to other KAP administrative staff • Promote awareness about mental health • Participates in all aspects of the Kelly Autism Program • Provide collaborative crisis services with community partners for students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of counselors • # of interns • # of therapy sessions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fostering a campus wide partnership between the Kelly Autism Program and Psychology/Social Work departments • Familiarize self with clients and client needs • Readily identify and evaluate potential mental health concerns • Increase self-awareness and competency in identifying triggers/stressors and applying known strategies • Provide opportunities for students to expand upon known social pragmatic skills in a safe, peer environment; build comradery and peer support in a facilitated setting. • Ability to identify students who need mental health support at that time; | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased knowledge and training for future service providers • Have foreknowledge of current mental health needs of participants • Contribute to research-based knowledge about autism and co morbid disorders • Students apply learned knowledge and skills to be self-sustainable in their emotional well being • Naturally integrate generalization to daily life; Strongly encouraging the building of a better social life for students while in college and beyond • Increase collaborative efforts; Increase awareness and acceptance of mental health challenges • Destigmatize Mental health services and issues |

| | | | |
|--|--|---|---|
| | | <p>Provide onsite consultation concerning student issues.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide an environment to openly discuss mental health challenges • Building a rapport and comfort level with KAP students outside of Counseling sessions • Support students learning critical thinking and problem-solving skills • Develop and implement a crisis plan; Assist in-need student in receiving level of care needed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased level of comfort to seek out services as needed • Decrease frequency of crisis situations by providing client a network of support |
|--|--|---|---|

| Activities What happens in our organization? | Outputs What are the tangible products of our activities? | Short-Term Outcomes What changes do we <u>expect</u> to occur within the short term? | Long-Term Outcomes What changes do we <u>hope</u> to see over time? |
|---|--|---|--|
| Weekly Advisor Meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss with the students about academics • Communicate to students through multiple mediums • Discuss different social opportunities available to students • Counsel and advise students on adult situations that may be present on a campus environment • Helping practice and encourage self-advocacy • Broker communication between students and other WKU entities • Assist students in organizing weekly schedule and developing organizational worksheets | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of meetings • 2 mid-semester grade reports, final grades | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students report academic progress efficiently and report any needs • Provide an immediate form of communication to assist students in mediating multiple daily issues • Students report social progress and assist students in navigating personal social activities • Acutely alleviate unnecessary stressors and anxiety present on a college campus • Serve as a role model for effective communication for the student and their environment • Have set schedule for assignments and other activities student will complete during the week • Provides a semester-long snapshot of progress made by student • Clear communication between tutor and student to ensure student is retaining and utilizing information discussed during advising meeting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student develops long-term familiarization with rigors in academic environment • Student will use skills and coping strategies outside of the college environment • Being able to utilize self-advocacy skills • Student will be able to implement their own weekly schedule and routines • Student can communicate information from advising meetings without mediator • Gaining experience to obtain and maintain gainful employment • Increase self-awareness and evaluate themselves in their own environments |

| | | | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Record weekly documentation • Transition students from meetings back to study tables and communicate ST goals to tutors • Refer to counseling as needed • Assist in applying for different jobs and internships • Ongoing academic grade evaluations • TOPs Planning • Communicating with student's parents as needed | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve as a role model for effective communication for the student and their environment • Gain meaningful work and vocational skills • Discuss with students grades and plans of improvement • Assist student and families in WKU and KAP admissions progress • Mediate and alleviate concerns parents may have | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Successful transition to WKU and KAP • Parents assistance with students transition to independence |
|---|--|---|---|

| <p align="center">Activities What happens in our organization?</p> | <p align="center">Outputs What are the tangible products of our activities?</p> | <p align="center">Short-Term Outcomes What changes do we <u>expect</u> to occur within the short term?</p> | <p align="center">Long-Term Outcomes What changes do we <u>hope</u> to see over time?</p> |
|---|---|--|---|
| <p>Study Tables Component</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing structured academic support with peer models • Completing daily, semester-long, documentation • Development of executive functioning skills • Develop organizational methods • Time management • Emotional control • Developing studying and test taking skills • Developing appropriate communication skills with University faculty, staff, and students • Developing appropriate verbal communication skills • Assist connecting students to resources outside of KAP • Utilizing SARC Accommodations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of study hours • Number of study tables sessions scheduled for • Students agenda, weekly/monthly calendars, student organizational sheets • Notecards, Quizlet, mock test, study guides • Written emails to faculty, staff, and other students • Students schedule • Resume • KAP Study Tables Schedule, Students Personal Study Tables Schedule, 12 hours of study tables time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To assist students to achieving their academic goals • Ensure students are meeting academic expectations. Provide communication between KAP tutors • Development of organization and being a contributing member of society • Assist each student to create a system that meets their specific individual needs • Assist students in developing schedules academics, and activities for KAP and WKU • Assist students in creating regulation for emotional responses to stress and changes in normal daily life • Increased scores on tests and quizzes • Developing appropriate written communication in a variety of settings/mediums | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being a successful employee in the workforce after graduating from college • Continued use of method into daily life • Continued use of method into daily life • Continued use of method into daily life • Ability to create their own study materials • Maintain personal relationships, achieve gainful employment • Independently connect with community and other resources in daily life • Independently advocate for needed accommodations for daily life activities • Be able to identify areas of need and be able to seek out assistance as needed • Create a better understanding for tutors |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing problem solving skills • Training tutors • Coordinating tutors based on students' needs • Monthly meetings with tutors • Facilitate transportation to get necessary equipment or needs of the students • Assisting students with WKU related tasks (registration, housing, university bill) • Provide an environment where students can develop a relationship with like peers • Assist students connect with different clubs and organizations on campus • Having access to private study areas as needed • Facilitate exams as needed • Provide a safe environment where students can complete class assignments and oral presentations • Mock interviews | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become effective communicators in a variety of settings • Students networking and advocating with a variety of WKU and community settings (SARC, ACDC, etc.), • Access to appropriate accommodations to facilitate classroom success • Assist students in developing strategies in solving daily problems • Prepare tutors to assist students specific academic and executive functioning needs • Receive feedback on how we can improve Study Tables from a tutor's perspective, and identifying student issues • Facilitate students having access to academic materials and/or personal items, teaching students to access available transportation • Registered for classes, Registered with HRL, Students have no holds, | <p>to take to their post-college work field</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the Study Tables program for all KAP students • Students will be able to access transportation services as needed. • Gaining long-term relationships and transferable social skills • Be able to identify interests and seek out affiliated organizations • Students gaining skills necessary to obtain gainful employment • Balance and schedule work life and leisure time • Use technology independently |
|---|--|--|---|

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a structured, concrete, schedule where students can schedule other KAP related events/requirements • Assist students with issues regarding technology • Provide an area where students can meet with Vocational Rehabilitation | | <p>Added accommodations with SARC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a culture of trust and acceptance where students can thrive • Students networking and advocating with a variety of WKU and community settings • Providing an environment that is conducive to student's sensory needs • Reduce test anxiety and meet students' accommodations • Reduce anxiety and meet students' accommodations, as well as sensory and social needs • Provide experience in an interview setting, and reduce anxiety • Setting expectations for students and providing the needed structure and schedule to ease student's anxiety and provide time for students to complete their tasks • Access and ability to operate all types of technology, and provide assistance in accessing | |
|--|--|---|--|

| | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| | | <p>resources to repair technology</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide access to VR counselors, and areas in KAP to meet with VR employees | |
|--|--|---|--|

| <p align="center">Activities</p> <p align="center">What happens in our organization?</p> | <p align="center">Outputs</p> <p align="center">What are the tangible products of our activities?</p> | <p align="center">Short-Term Outcomes</p> <p align="center">What changes do we <u>expect</u> to occur within the short term?</p> | <p align="center">Long-Term Outcomes</p> <p align="center">What changes do we <u>hope</u> to see over time?</p> |
|--|--|--|---|
| <p>Mentoring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan and facilitate social activities for students to participate • Community and University partnerships • Peer to Peer support • Connecting students with registered campus organizations • Help assist students learn independent living life skills • Assisting students connect with other students in the program | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of socials each month • Different variations of socials offered to students | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help increase social awareness and social skills in a natural environment • Develop pragmatic social language skills • Developing proper social manners • Fostering an environment where peers can appropriately socialize with peers • Giving back to the WKU and Bowling Green community • Getting students out of their comfort zone • Developing new experiences • Developing time management skills for leisure activities • Expanding college experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly encouraging the building of a better social life for students while in college and beyond • Naturally integrate generalization to daily life • Build confidence to choose and maintain their role in their community • Community awareness and shared acceptance long term • Leave KAP with more flexibility regarding social interactions • Departing KAP with an open mind and desire on various community activities • Use strategies to manage work and leisure time |

APPENDIX B: PSAP Student Survey

Thank you so much for taking this survey! I appreciate your willingness to help!

Q1 What is your age?

Q2 What is your sex?

Male (1)

Female (2)

Q52 What is your ethnicity?

White (4)

Black or African American (5)

American Indian or Alaska Native (6)

Asian (7)

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (8)

Other (9)

Q3 What year are you in college?

- Freshman (1)
 - Sophomore (2)
 - Junior (3)
 - Senior (4)
-

Q4 How many semesters have you been a participant in The Kelly Autism Program Circle of Support?

Q6 What is your overall WKU GPA?

- Less than 2.0 (1)
 - 2.0-2.5 (2)
 - 2.5-3.0 (3)
 - 3.0-3.5 (4)
 - 3.5-4.0 (5)
 - Unknown/None (6)
-

Q7 What is your major or area of concentration?

Q8 Where are you from?

Q9 How old were you when you received an ASD diagnosis?

Q53 Having access to an individual residence hall room has assisted with my academic progress.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly Disagree (13)
- Not applicable to me (14)

Q53 I find/found the individual room helpful in managing stressful situations and anxiety.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly Disagree (5)
- Not applicable to me (6)

Q54 Having access to an individual room has assisted me in developing self-monitoring and self-awareness skills.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly Disagree (5)
- Not applicable to me (6)

Q55 Having access to an individual room has assisted me in building problem solving skills and self-advocacy skills in a controlled environment while fostering life-long independence.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to me (6)
-

Q56 Overall, I find the individual room a beneficial part of the program.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to me (6)
-

Q28 Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning individual rooms in the residence hall. If you have none, please leave the box below blank.

Q57 Having access to planned social activities has assisted me in developing social skills and awareness in a natural environment.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q58 Having access to planned social activities has given me new experiences and gotten me out of my comfort zone.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q59 Planned social activities have helped me to improve social interactions and social manners.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q60 Having access to planned social activities has helped me to integrate my social skills into daily life and assisted me in becoming more flexible in my social interactions.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q61 Overall, I find the social activities are a beneficial part of the program.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q29 Please list any suggestions or comments concerning socials? If none, please leave the box below blank.

Q62 Having access to mental health counseling has been helpful in assisting me in organization, prioritization, and emotional regulation.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to me (6)
-

Q63 Having access to a mental health counselor has helped me to build social skills and support in a facilitated setting.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to me (6)
-

Q64 Having access to a mental health counselor has helped me to have a forum to openly discuss mental health challenges.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to me (6)
-

Q65 Having access to a mental health counselor within the program has helped me or others within the program to negotiate crisis situations.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to me (6)
-

Q66 Overall, I find the access to a mental health counselor a beneficial part of the program.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly Disagree (5)
- Not applicable to me (6)

Q36 Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning counseling? If not, please leave the box below blank.

Q67 Having access to scheduled/monitored study sessions is helpful to my academic progress.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q68 The study sessions help me to stay scheduled, prioritize, and problem solve my classroom assignments.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly Disagree (5)

Q69 Having access to scheduled/monitored study session have helped to ease my anxiety and stress concerning class assignments and tasks.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q70 The study table sessions have helped me to gain studying skills.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q71 Overall, the study table sessions are a productive part of the program and have helped me to progress toward my academic goals.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q43 Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning study tables? If none, please leave the box below blank.

Q72 The mentoring program has connected me to activities and interests on the WKU campus.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q73 The mentoring program has provided me with an environment to socialize with peers.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q74 The mentoring program has expanded my college experience.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q75 The skills learned during mentoring activities have helped me to improve my time management and balance school work and leisure time.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q76 Overall, having planned activities involving peer mentors is a productive part of the Kelly Autism Program and has helped me to progress in my social growth.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q51 Please list any suggestions or comments concerning mentoring? If none, please leave the box below blank.

Q77 Weekly adviser meetings have assisted me in problem solving, organization, and grade monitoring.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q78 Weekly adviser meetings have helped me to improve my written and verbal communication skills.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q79 Weekly adviser meetings have helped me to navigate conversations and communication with professors and the WKU community.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q80 Weekly adviser meetings give me a safe environment to voice my progress and needs.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q81 Overall, having a weekly meeting with a consistent KAP adviser is a productive part of the Kelly Autism Program and has helped me to progress in my personal goals.

Strongly agree (1)

Agree (2)

Neutral (3)

Disagree (4)

Strongly Disagree (5)

Q58 Please list any suggestions or comments concerning advising? If none, please leave the box below blank.

Q82 The KAP program has helped me to gain independence and self-advocacy skills.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q83 The KAP program has assisted me in improving my communication skills, and social skills.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q84 The KAP program has supported me emotionally and with mental health well-being.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q85 The KAP program has assisted me in improving vocational skills and preparing for the workplace.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q54 The KAP Circle of Support Program has helped me to progress toward my academic progress and goals.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (8)
-

Q86 Overall, the KAP program has been effective in assisting me toward meeting my life goals.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q65 Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning the Kelly Autism Program? If not, please leave the box below blank.

Q66 What area of support offered by the Kelly Autism Program Circle of Support has been the most beneficial to you?

APPENDIX C: PSAP Parent Survey

Q1 What is your age?

Q2 What is your sex?

Male (1)

Female (2)

Q52 What is your ethnicity?

White (4)

Black or African American (5)

American Indian or Alaska Native (6)

Asian (7)

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (8)

Other (9)

Q3 Where is your current place of residence?

Q53 What is your level of education?

- Some high school completed (1)
 - High school graduate/GED earned (2)
 - Some college completed (3)
 - Associate's degree (4)
 - Bachelor's degree (5)
 - Master's degree or higher (6)
-

Q4 What is your average annual household income?

- \$10,000-40,000 (1)
 - \$40,000-80,000 (2)
 - \$80,000-120,000 (3)
 - \$120,000+ (4)
-

Q6 How many dependents reside in your household?

- none (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3+ (4)

Q9 Did your student receive funding towards their enrollment in the Kelly Autism Program? If so, from where?

Q13 The program staff have been helpful negotiating housing arrangements for my student.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly Disagree (5)
- Not applicable to my student (6)

Q53 I find/found the individual room helpful in managing stressful situations and anxiety for my student.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly Disagree (5)
- Not applicable to my student (6)

Q54 Having access to an individual room has assisted my student in developing self-monitoring and self-awareness skills.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly Disagree (5)
- Not applicable to my student (6)

Q55 Having access to an individual room has allowed my student to develop problem solving, and self-advocacy skills in a controlled environment while fostering life-long independence.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to my student (6)
-

Q56 Overall, I find the individual room a beneficial part of the program.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to my student (6)
-

Q28 Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning individual residence hall rooms? If none, please leave the box below blank.

Q57 Having access to planned social activities has assisted my student in developing social skills and awareness in a natural environment.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q58 Having access to planned social activities has given my student new experiences and gotten them out of my comfort zone.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q59 Planned social activities have helped my student to improve social skills and social manners.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q60 Attending socials have helped my student integrate their social skills into daily life and assisted them in becoming more flexible in their social interactions.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q61 Overall, I find the social activities a beneficial part of the program.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q29 Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning socials? If none, please leave the box below blank.

Q62 Having access to a mental health counselor has assisted my student in their organization and prioritization.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to my student (6)
-

Q63 Having access to a mental health counselor has helped my student to build social skills and support in a facilitated setting.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to my student (6)
-

Q64 Having access to a mental health counselor has helped my student to have a forum to openly discuss mental health challenges.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to my student (6)
-

Q65 The ability to access a mental health counselor within the program has helped my students or others within the program negotiate crisis situations.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to my student (6)
-

Q66 Overall, I find the access to a mental health counselor a beneficial part of the program.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
 - Not applicable to my student (6)
-

Q36 Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning counseling? If none, please leave the box below blank.

Q67 Having access to scheduled/monitored study sessions is helpful to my student.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q68 The study sessions help my student to stay scheduled, prioritize, and problem solve their classroom assignments.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q69 The staff and tutors are available, helpful, and knowledgeable during study sessions.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q70 The study table sessions have helped my student to gain studying skills.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q71 Overall, the study table sessions are a productive part of the program and has helped my student to progress toward my academic goals.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q43 Do you have any suggestions or comments concerning study tables? If not, please leave the box below blank.

Q72 The mentoring program has connected my student to activities and interests on the WKU campus.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q73 The mentoring program has provided my student with an environment to socialize with peers.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q74 The mentoring program has expanded my student's college experience.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q75 The skills learned during mentoring activities have helped my student to improve time management and balancing school work and leisure time.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q76 Overall, having planned activities involving peer mentors is a productive part of the Kelly Autism Program and has helped my student to progress in social growth.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q51 Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning mentoring? If none, please leave the box below blank.

Q77 Weekly adviser meetings have assisted my student in problem solving, organization, and grade monitoring.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q78 Weekly adviser meetings have helped my student to improve my written and verbal communication skills.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q79 Weekly adviser meetings have helped my student to navigate conversations and communication with professors and the WKU community.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q80 Weekly adviser meetings give my student a safe environment to voice my progress and needs.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q81 Overall, having a weekly meeting with a consistent KAP adviser is a productive part of the Kelly Autism Program and has helped my student to progress in my personal goals.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q58 Do you have any suggestions or comments concerning advising? If not, please leave the box below blank.

Q82 The KAP program has helped my student to gain independence and self-advocacy skills.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q83 The KAP program has assisted my student in improving their executive functions skills, communication skills, and social skills.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q84 The KAP program has supported my student emotionally and with mental health well-being.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q85 The KAP program has assisted my student in improving vocational skills and preparing for the workplace.

- Strongly agree (1)
 - Agree (2)
 - Neutral (3)
 - Disagree (4)
 - Strongly Disagree (5)
-

Q86 Overall, the KAP program has been effective in assisting my student toward meeting my life goals.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neutral (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly Disagree (5)

Q65 Please provide any suggestions or comments concerning the Kelly Autism Program? If none, please leave the box below blank.

Q66 In your personal opinion, what area of support offered by the Kelly Autism Program Circle of Support has been the most beneficial to your student?

APPENDIX D: Staff Focus Group Questions

1. How long have you been a tutor/staff member within the program?
2. How did you first learn of and become interested in KAP?
3. Think back to when you first became involved with the program. What were your first impressions?
4. What do you think are the strengths of the program?
5. What do you think are the weakest areas of the program?
6. What if anything would you change or modify of any part of the program areas of support?

APPENDIX E: Institutional Board Review



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY

DATE: April 15, 2019

TO: Michelle Elkins, BS, MS, doctoral candidate
FROM: Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1421273-1] Support Programming for Student's on the Autism Spectrum:
An evaluation of Current Programming and Components offered by the Kelly
Autism Program Circle of Support

REFERENCE #: IRB 19-382
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: April 15, 2019
EXPIRATION DATE: November 30, 2019
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a *signed/implied* consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a MINIMAL RISK project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of November 30, 2019.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Robin Pyles at (270) 745-3360 or irb@wku.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

APPENDIX F: Informed Consent Document – Students



INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: Support Programming for Student's on the Autism Spectrum: An evaluation of Current Programming and Components offered by the Kelly Autism Program Circle of Support
Investigator: Michelle Elkins, MS, CCC-SLP; Director, Kelly Autism Program Clinical Education Complex Western Kentucky University; michelle.elkins@wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your agreement to participate in this project.

You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have. You should keep a copy of this form for your records.

1. **Nature and Purpose of the Project:** The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the current programming support components with college students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder who are participants in the Kelly Autism Program COS.

2. **Explanation of Procedures:**

You will be asked to complete a survey. This survey will be distributed to the students enrolled in the Kelly Autism Program. You will be asked to complete 52 questions and 7 open ended questions. The surveys will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

3. **Discomfort and Risks:** There are no known risks to the participant as a result of participation in this project.

4. **Benefits:** The feedback and information given in these surveys will allow The Kelly Autism Program to have a better understanding of the benefits and effectiveness of the components currently being implemented. In turn, this will allow the administration to problem solve, adjust, and have better knowledge of the programs in which the stakeholders (students, parents, staff) find most effective. The survey results will also allow us to know the way in which the components need to be adjusted to ensure maximum student success academically, socially, emotionally and vocationally.

5. **Confidentiality:** Survey responses will remain anonymous. Records will be viewed, stored, and maintained in private, secure files only accessible by the P.I. for three years following the study, after which time they will be destroyed.

6. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

Your continued cooperation with the following research implies your consent.

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Robin Pyles, Human Protections Administrator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-3360

| |
|----------------------|
| WKU IRB# 19-382 |
| Approved: 4/15/2019 |
| End Date: 11/30/2019 |
| EXPEDITED |
| Original: 4/15/2019 |

APPENDIX G: Informed Consent Document – Parents



INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: Support Programming for Student's on the Autism Spectrum: An evaluation of Current Programming and Components offered by the Kelly Autism Program Circle of Support

Investigator: Michelle Elkins, MS, CCC-SLP; Director, Kelly Autism Program Clinical Education Complex Western Kentucky University; michelle.elkins@wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your agreement to participate in this project.

You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have. You should keep a copy of this form for your records.

1. **Nature and Purpose of the Project:** The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the current programming support components with college students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder who are participants in the Kelly Autism Program COS.

2. **Explanation of Procedures:**

You will be asked to complete a survey will be distributed to the parents/guardians of each of the student participants that will also contain 52 questions and 7 open ended questions. The surveys will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

3. **Discomfort and Risks:** There are no know risks to the participant as a result of participation in this project.

4. **Benefits:** The feedback and information given in these surveys will allow The Kelly Autism Program to have a better understanding of the benefits and effectiveness of the components currently being implemented. In turn, this will allow the administration to problem solve, adjust, and have better knowledge of the programs in which the stakeholders (students, parents, staff) find most effective. The survey results will also allow us to know the way in which the components need to be adjusted to ensure maximum student success academically, socially, emotionally and vocationally.

5. **Confidentiality:** Survey responses will remain anonymous. Records will be viewed, stored, and maintained in private, secure files only accessible by the P.I. for three years following the study, after which time they will be destroyed.

6. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

Your continued cooperation with the following research implies your consent.

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Robin Pyles, Human Protections Administrator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-3360

WKU IRB# 19-382
Approved: 4/15/2019
End Date: 11/30/201
EXPEDITED
Original: 4/15/2019

APPENDIX H: Informed Consent Document – Full-Time Staff



INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: Support Programming for Student's on the Autism Spectrum: An evaluation of Current Programming and Components offered by the Kelly Autism Program Circle of Support
Investigator: Michelle Elkins, MS, CCC-SLP; Director, Kelly Autism Program Clinical Education Complex Western Kentucky University; michelle.elkins@wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have. If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

- Nature and Purpose of the Project:** The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of the current programming support components with college students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder who are participants in the Kelly Autism Program COS.
- Explanation of Procedures:** You will be asked to participate in a focus group containing 6 opened questions for group discussion. The session will be audio recorded to ensure correct transcription and interpretation. The group discussion will take approximately 1 hour to complete.
- Discomfort and Risks:** There are no know risks to the participant as a result of participation in this project.
- Benefits:** The feedback and information given in these surveys will allow The Kelly Autism Program to have a better understanding of the benefits and effectiveness of the components currently being implemented. In turn, this will allow the administration to problem solve, adjust, and have better knowledge of the programs in which the stakeholders (students, parents, staff) find most effective. The survey results will also allow us to know the way in which the components need to be adjusted to ensure maximum student success academically, socially, emotionally and vocationally.
- Confidentiality:** Your responses will be kept confidential. Personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings. Records will be viewed, stored, and maintained in private, secure files only accessible by the P.I. for three years following the study, after which time they will be destroyed.

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| WKU IRB# 19-382 Approved: 4/15/2019 End Date: 11/30/2019 EXPEDITED Original: 4/15/2019 |
|--|