

GRIT-BASED CURRICULUM AND EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE
STUDENTS WITH EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING CHALLENGES: A COLLECTIVE CASE
STUDY

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter, Autumn. We started this journey when you were ten years old. You listened while I read Paulo Freire and Michel Foucault to you at bedtime. You studied with me at every location in town with free internet. You joined study groups with me and endured hours of discussions while you studied, read books, or watched movies. Finally, this year at age fourteen, you cheered me on at my dissertation defense. Thank you for joining me on this path and sacrificing your time for my dream. This is your accomplishment, too. I look forward to supporting your dreams next and discovering where your love of learning takes you in life.

ABSTRACT

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Students with disabilities are rarely mentioned in national discussions of student success at public 2-year colleges, despite the increasing number of students with disabilities who transition to community colleges each year. A growing number of high school graduates with executive functioning challenges (such as those experienced by individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder or ASD) are enrolling in community colleges that inadequately support these students' academic success, retention, and preparation for the workplace. Concurrently, strategies for cultivating *grit* in students as one way to support students in achieving personal and academic goals have been gaining popularity in mainstream media, as well as K-12 and higher education. The purpose of this case study was to explore how community college students, diagnosed with executive functioning challenges, described their experiences with a grit-enhanced community college transitional program. Data sources included transcribed responses from multiple, semi-structured interviews with students who were enrolled in a grit-enhanced course offered at a select community college system in the Southern United States. Thematic and content analysis served as the overarching data analysis approaches involving first and second cycle coding. Then, frameworks of Grit theory and Critical Disability theory were applied to inform the interpretation process.

KEY WORDS: Disability, Grit, Executive Functioning Skills, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Community College; Critical Disability Theory.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Each year, an increasing number of students with disabilities graduate from high school and enter colleges across the United States. College completion is more crucial than ever to secure employment. Postsecondary education and training are now required for over 70% of jobs in the United States (Carnevale, 2016). A college education is especially critical for individuals with disabilities who are more likely to be unemployed at 10.7% compared to their non-disabled peers who are unemployed at 5.1% (Hanson & Gulush, 2016; U. S. Bureau of Labor, 2015). The impact of unemployment is far reaching for all people and leads to financial stress, health problems, and social, political, and community isolation. However, unemployment is particularly daunting for those individuals with disabilities (Oliver & Barnes, 2012).

Community colleges often are primary postsecondary educational options for students with disabilities (NCES, 2015). Yet, community colleges and universities are frequently ill-equipped to support students who learn differently. According to Mader and Butrymowicz (2018), only 41% of students with disabilities graduate from 2-year colleges within 8 years. Students with disabilities who reported more need for developmental courses and tutoring services took more time and cost more money to graduate (ASHE, 2013). Fewer adults with disabilities earn a bachelor's degree when compared to peers without disabilities (U. S. Bureau of Labor, 2015). Encouraging academic success for individuals with disabilities must become part of the national discussion on college completion.

Scholars have proposed a range of strategies to prepare all students for a more competitive workforce, including a call for more education (Berriman & Hawksworth, 2017) and a more rigorous curriculum (Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2017). Additionally, colleges and universities are beginning to develop non-credit transition programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities (McEathron, Beuhring, Maynard, & Mavis, 2013). These programs stem from changes to the Higher Education Act in 2008, which provided grant funding to develop transitional programs focused on supporting the growing number of students diagnosed with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including students with executive functioning challenges and/or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Hendrickson, Carson, Woods-Groves, Mendenhall, & Scheidecker, 2013). College leaders have also explored programs to raise student awareness of non-cognitive traits, such as *grit* (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Stoltz, 2014), or the tenacity one demonstrates in striving for difficult goals, which could be strengthened to help students persist in college. Nationwide, non-cognitive trait strengthening strategies have been gaining attention (Kamenetz, 2015). Consequently, curriculum programs designed to assist students in developing social and academic skills from a strengths-based standpoint may have the potential to create supportive classrooms and positively affect retention of students with disabilities.

Tinto (1997) called the college classroom the “crossroads where the social and the academic meet” (p. 599). Students bring their personal experiences to the classroom, and these experiences influence how students will engage at college, both socially with other students and academically in the classroom. These social and academic integration factors can facilitate college completion (Tinto, 1993, 2012). First-year experiences have

been developed to facilitate college transitioning for the general population of students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), as well as for at-risk and traditionally marginalized students (Connolly, Flynn, Jemmott & Oestreicher, 2017). Yet, college students with disabilities encounter more academic and social challenges compared to their peers (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger & Lan, 2010; Koch, Mamiseishvili, & Higgins, 2014; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012; Stamp, Banerjee & Brown, 2014), even though homogeneity in life experiences among individuals with disabilities cannot be assumed (Oliver & Barnes, 2012).

Access to education, an historical challenge for individuals with disabilities, dictates who has access to knowledge and therefore who has the power and ability to fully participate as an informed and contributing citizen in American society (Evans, Broido, Brown, & Wilke, 2017). Higher levels of educational attainment have been associated with higher levels of home ownership (Chakrabarti, Gorton, & Van der Klaauw, 2017) and higher earnings (Tinto, 2012). Higher levels of educational attainment have also been positively associated with longer life expectancy for individuals with and without disabilities (Laditka & Laditka, 2016).

Access to college leads to credentials necessary for future job attainment. Today, scholars warn that the number and types of jobs expected to be available in the future are declining and the competition for available jobs is increasing (Frey & Osborne, 2013; Frey & Osborne, 2017). More employers are reporting increased value on communication skills, analysis, and leadership (Carnevale, 2013); skills which may be challenging skills for individuals with certain types of disabilities (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit disorder). Finally, due to technological advances, which reduce

reliance on humans as a resource (e.g., self-checkout stations in retail), wealth inequalities in developed nations also are on the rise (Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2017).

Higher education traditionally has offered pathways to economic advancement that potentially can supersede wealth inequities. However, despite the potential advantages of completing college, completion rates are at historically low levels. For example, the “three-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time degree/certificate-seeking students in fall 2010” was only 29.4% (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Hwang, 2016, p. 6). College completion is presented as a national priority for community college and university leaders, yet college leaders often lack adequate information to help them understand and support the unique needs of students with disabilities (Leake, 2015). Research describing the experiences of individuals with disabilities and documenting positive support interventions is needed to inform college program planning and support services (Brown & Coomes, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

Some scholars claim that students who are exposed to the concepts and behaviors associated with a *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2008) and *grit* (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007) develop new beliefs about their abilities to learn and grow, which lead to the development of social and academic skills that support goal achievement in college and in life (Stoltz, 2014). Grit-enhanced curricula may also represent positive options for college students with disabilities. Yet limited research has been conducted to examine how growth or grit-enhanced programs influence the experiences of community college students with disabilities.

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study is to explore the experiences of community college students with executive functioning challenges who participated in a grit-enhanced curriculum at a large community college. Specifically, this study is designed to allow students with disabilities who have participated in at least two semesters of a curriculum enhanced by grit theory to articulate their experiences at the college.

Educational Significance

Although enrollments of students with disabilities continue to rise annually, especially at two-year public community colleges (Raue & Lewis, 2011), research and statistical data on students with disabilities is difficult to find (Faggella-Luby, Lombardi, & Dukes, 2014; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012) and lacking in accuracy (Leake, 2015). Academic literature on disability issues in higher education in “top-tier journals of higher education” also is limited in both quantity and diversity of focus (Peña, 2014, p. 31). Research is especially lacking about students with disabilities that affect executive functioning, such as ASD and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), (Sayman, 2015; Stamp, Banerjee, & Brown, 2014).

Information gained through this study will build on existing literature and further the inclusion of disability issues in national conversations about student success in community colleges in the United States. This study is also significant because the increased enrollment of students with disabilities has emphasized the need for community college leaders to understand, prepare for, and serve the unique needs of students with executive functioning skill challenges. The findings from this study can be utilized to respond to calls for qualitative inquiry by promoting greater understanding of the

experiences of students who are actively learning about and compensating for challenges in executive functioning skills (Faggella-Luby, Lombardi, & Dukes, 2014). Knowledge gained from this study can be used by disability service providers, administrators, and college leaders to inform academic programming, student social skill development interventions, and retention practices in higher education.

Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study was to understand the experiences of a select group of community college students with executive functioning challenges who participated in a specially designed, grit-enhanced curriculum. The question used to guide this study was: How do community college students, diagnosed with executive functioning challenges, describe their experiences with a grit-enhanced transitional college program?

Profile of the Researcher

I grew up in a small village in upstate New York, which had a census of 2,199 in 2010. The village where I grew up was and has remained predominantly white (73%) (www.census.gov). Despite the lack of racial diversity where I grew up, I remember always being aware of class differences and related power dynamics. My grandmother, Amy Malloy, was a social worker who also had a love of antiques. During summer break, she frequently took with me with her during trips to look for antiques around the county. While we drove around the county, she would share stories about the challenges faced by the families she worked with. My grandmother was educated at a time when many females did not attend college, as was her mother. My grandmother married a dairy farmer and had 8 children of her own. She instilled the value of education of

education in her children. She was a major influence on my life, teaching me that all people have value regardless of where they come from.

In 1990, I left my hometown to attend a private university near Canada as a financial aid student. My major was Psychology. Psychology was, in my experience, too theoretical. I interned at an emergency call center and ended up deciding the study of psychology was not preparing me how to offer practical help for people who needed help *now*. I pursued a Master of Social Work instead because it seemed less abstract in nature. I learned how to work with people with the tools and resources they already had access to, or I helped them connect to the resources they needed. I graduated with a Master of Social Work degree in 1996. Although my studies in Social Work placed an emphasis on Bowen theory (Palombi, 2016) and introduced us to the critical writings of Szasz (1990), the clinical and licensure exams required me to memorize coding found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM, 2013).

I do not identify myself as a person with an impairing disability. I recognize that this is relevant in the context of this study. I have benefited from many privileges. I am aware that privileges have been extended to me as an able-bodied and white person in a society that still discriminates based on ability and race. I have natural skills that helped me excel academically, and this has also led to steady employment and avoidance of economic hardship. I have had the privilege of being able to set and achieve many personal goals.

Despite my desire to value what each person has to offer as a unique individual, I am also aware that I have been well trained in the medical model of understanding disabilities. I have been, and remain affected by, the political and social context I live in,

as a member of society in the United States. My work experience as a counselor for children in foster care, as an administrator over a day program for adults with chronic mental health illness, and even as an administrator at a public community college, have repeatedly reinforced the medical model of understanding disabilities. Through undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate studies I have attempted to counterbalance those teachings by learning about power dynamics, social justice, and as many different models of understanding mental health and disability-related issues as I could find. My worldview aligns with a *social constructivist worldview*. Through this philosophical perspective, individuals “seek understanding of” and “develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). Social constructivists believe meaning “is formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (Creswell, 2014, p. 8).

In this study, I attempted to remain aware of my personal worldview, *and* articulate the experiences of the students participating in this study. The students in the study have unique experiences and interactions with the college and with their curriculum. Their voices are seldom heard. Their stories are much needed by the greater academic community – a community still learning to provide support and services to individuals who do not fit stereotypes of a “normal” college student.

Conceptual Framework

Two conceptual frameworks support and influence this study; *grit* (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Stoltz, 2014) and critical disability theory, or CDT (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). Current issues relevant to both concepts are detailed in Chapter II. I chose these two conceptual frameworks to inform my study because

ableism, or the practice of favoring those who are able-bodied, is a type of discrimination that tends to dominate practices in colleges across the United States (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012, p. 40; ASHE, 2013). Ableism emphasizes the tendency to dehumanize or disenfranchise individuals with disabilities within societal contexts. Critical theories provide a framework for understanding systemic power dynamics, as well as the ways groups of people experience and navigate systemic power dynamics in their daily lives. Similarly, the concept of grit operates at the individual level. Resting on strength-based theories, understanding and developing grit exemplifies how an individual can better understand his or her own strengths and areas for growth, then focus their energy on building their own strengths to overcome adversity.

Grit. Grit is a concept which has emerged from positive psychology, a field of psychology focusing on “the scientific study of positive experiences and positive individual traits” (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005, p. 630). Scholars of positive psychology have researched a number of character traits, including love of learning, happiness, and self-regulation (Seligman, Steen, & Park, 2005), resiliency (McGeown, St. Clair-Thompson, & Clough, 2016; Nicolazzi, 2016) and mindset (Dweck, 2006). Grit has been described as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” and it involves “working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007, p. 1087). Stoltz (2014) has focused on assessments and tools to help individuals evaluate, understand, and develop grit. Stoltz (2014) has defined a revised version of grit. Grit is the “capacity to dig deep and do whatever it takes - even sacrifice, struggle, and suffer - to achieve your most worthy goals” (p. 2). Stoltz (2014)

acknowledged the concept of resilience “has risen to premier status among what it takes to thrive in today’s times,” however he has also asserted “resilience is not enough” when it comes to achieving difficult goals (p. 65). Through Stoltz’s (2014) work, assessments have been developed to measure levels of GRIT overall, and separate gauges to examine individual dimensions of GRIT - Growth, Resiliency, Instinct, Tenacity, and Robustness. His primary audience is the general public, and not academia. Stoltz (2014) utilizes books, webpages, presentations, and videos to disseminate information about understanding grit development as a character strength.

Critical Disability Theory. Critical disability theory (CDT) is a form of “embodied theory” (Pothier & Devlin, 2006, p. 9) which examines the societal and political influence of disabilities in a globalized world. Legislative decisions in a democratic society allow societal beliefs to become institutionalized. Historically in the United States, legislation has been used to protect able-bodied citizens from those deemed as different or deficient. For example, legislation has been designed to bar immigrant entry of persons with disabilities (Davis, 2017) and to sterilize and incarcerate individuals with physical and psychological impairments (Nielsen, 2012). Critical Disability theory rests on beliefs in human rights and theories of equality. Examining societal differences through a critical disability lens allows us to make connections between “existing legal, economic, political and social rationales” which impact how inclusive our society is for individuals with disabilities (Pothier & Devlin, 2006, p.48).

Summary

This chapter described the need for the proposed qualitative study. This study was designed to examine the experiences of community college students with challenges

in executive functioning skills who were enrolled in a grit-enhanced curriculum. The conceptual frameworks undergirding the study were also described and discussed. Chapter II includes a review of the relevant literature related to this proposed study. Chapter III provides a description of the research methods to be employed during the study. Results are discussed in Chapter IV, followed by summary discussion and recommendations regarding the findings in Chapter V. Supplemental information is provided in the attached tables and appendix.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

This review of literature will examine four different areas to provide context for this study, to support the methodology of the study, and to facilitate the interpretation of the themes and findings derived from this study. Specifically, this literature review will examine (a) the history of disability models in the United States; (b) autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and executive functioning challenges; (c) students with ASD in U.S. Higher Education; (d) the theoretical concept of Critical Disability Theory (CDT); and (e) the concept of grit (Duckworth, 2007; Stoltz, 2014) and its role in higher education. I was purposeful in my article selection for this literature review and attempted to find articles representing central themes related to the participants, context, and methodology of the proposed qualitative study (Randolph, 2009, p. 4).

History of Disability Models in the United States

Defining disability is not a simple matter. Perceptions of what disability *is* have varied over time. Disability definitions are strongly influenced by economic, social, and political factors. Scholars have argued the concept of disability is present throughout American history, even when not overtly mentioned in historical textbooks (Davis, 2017; Longmore & Goldberger, 2000; Nielsen, 2012; Oliver & Barnes, 2012; Verstraete, 2007). When mentioned specifically, disability is frequently described as the mirror image of *normal* (Davis, Luce-Kapler, & Sumara, 2015; Foucault, 1995).

Societies develop the concept of disability depending on societal values. Prior to the 19th century, non-European cultures had little interest in categorizing people as able or disabled (Davis, 2017; Nielsen, 2012). The concept of “normality,” as we understand it

today, was not articulated in Western society until 1849 (Davis, 2017, p. 2). The concept of disability emerged earlier, during an important phase when industrialism and immigration were both increasing in an emerging country (Nielsen, 2012). As noted in immigration and slavery laws, veteran's benefits, and poor laws dating back to the 1600s, disability definitions in the United States emphasized ability versus inability to work (Nielsen, 2012).

In the 1600s, state statutes still guaranteed that local communities would “take effectual care and make necessary provision for” individuals (i.e., local individuals of the community only) with disabilities (Nielsen, 2012, p. 25). However, the colonies were still affiliated with England in the 1600s. By the late 1700s, America emerged as an economic and political system that placed value on individual interests, such as the right to own property. Plantation wealth, slave trade, and industrialism contributed to a more capitalistic society in the United States, shifting the focus from the community to the individual (Nielsen, 2012; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). Embedded definitions of disability in emerging law institutionalized a deficit-based viewpoint of disability that exists in many aspects of American society today.

The concept of disability is frequently interpreted through a specific perspective or theoretical model. Reflecting disability through a model of thought provides a context against which “disability-relevant limitations” (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017, p. 432) can be understood. Similarly, in their research on identity-first language, Dunn and Andrews (2015) agreed on the importance of intellectual frameworks as context for understanding disability language. The 2013 ASHE Higher Education Report (ASHE, 2013) identified six separate frameworks for understanding disability in the United States. These models,

in chronological order, included “the moral model, the medical model, the functional limitations framework, the minority group paradigm, the social construction model, and the social justice perspective” (ASHE, 2013, p. 54).

The moral model drew upon religious explanation for disabilities (ASHE, 2013; Dunn & Andrews, 2015), identifying conditions such as blindness or psychological challenges as punishment for sins or a lesson from God. The medical and rehabilitation models are also deficit-based models; framing disability through the lens of an identified medical problem that reduces a person’s level of ability (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). Similarly, the functional limitations model also reinforced a belief that individuals with a disability were at a deficit when compared to non-disabled peers (ASHE, 2013).

The medical model became pervasive during the 1700s (ASHE, 2013), and gained acceptance as the practice of medicine developed and became standardized across the United States in the 1800s (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). Despite the persistence of the medical model, there have been challenges to its pervasiveness. The medical model has been highly criticized for reinforcing the view that disability is primarily an individual’s problem (Longmore & Goldberger, 2000). Having a disability was a failing that ultimately “reduces our social capital” (Garland-Thomson, 2012, p. 340). This view leads to perceptions that the person is the problem, and researchers have linked this perception to the higher levels of social stigma (Pothier & Devlin, 2006; Dunn & Andrews, 2015; Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012).

The minority group paradigm is another model that emerged through efforts to move beyond the medical model and the deficit-focus of such frameworks. Individuals first identify with a minority group, acknowledging a reality where they share layered

experiences of discrimination, power differences, external pressures, and social barriers. Although some individuals may find it hard to connect with peers in this way, college campuses are unique environments able to nurture disability student groups and other activist groups where students may be able to develop a minority group paradigm (ASHE, 2013, p. 53)

In the 20th century, challenges to the medical model also facilitated the development of the social construction model as a new framework where disability was not aligned directly with a moral flaw or a medical deficit. Similar to the minority group paradigm, the social model proposed an external consideration of disability (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017). The social model acknowledges intersecting realities, where a person has their individual experience of the disability and also experiences a societal reaction to that disability. In the social model, the stigma surrounding disabilities is described as a social barrier and it is recognized that as such, stigma creates additional barriers to inclusion. The social justice model is an anti-oppression model focused on reversing society's reverence for able-bodied individuals (e.g., ableism) (ASHE, 2013, p. 53-54). Instead of confirming why the person with a disability should be treated separately from individuals without a disability, the social justice perspective illustrates how society benefits from including individuals with all levels of ability into the community (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017).

Despite the perspectives noted above, the medical model remains a prevalent and constantly reinforced perspective in the workplace and in higher education in the United States. The result of much wordsmithing, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (Public Law 101–336, 1990), attempted to marry the medical model with the social

realities of having a documented history of disability and of being treated as if a person has a disability. Although the ADA was amended in 2008 to emphasize goals of inclusion intended in the original version, the ADA still defines disability through a deficit-model perspective. Title II Regulations § 35.108 stated, “Disability means, with respect to an individual: (i) A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; (ii) A record of such an impairment; or (iii) Being regarded as having such an impairment as described in paragraph (f) of this section (www.ada.gov).” Employers and higher education professionals are, therefore, legally obligated to perceive disability through a medical model lens. Balancing a medical model understanding of a diagnosis and the social justice model of understanding and responding to an individual with a disability is a challenging task for higher education professionals. This becomes apparent when examining specific conditions named in the DSM-5 (American Psychological Association, 2013), such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Autism Spectrum Disorder and Conditions with Executive Functioning Challenges

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has traits also found in other conditions affected many people in the United States. One of these traits has to do how memory works or our *executive control* of our memory. Willingham (2016) described *executive control* as a process which “handles this management of thought,” clarifying that in this instance the word control “means command, rather than resisting temptation” (p. 31). At an even higher level, *executive functioning* would refer to “how effectively all of the pieces of working memory operate, including self-regulation, executive control, and others” (Willingham, 2016, p. 31).

Similarly, researchers have described *executive functioning* as the “cross-temporal organization of behavior to achieve future goals” (Barkley and Fischer, 2011, p. 138) and as “self-regulation across time for the attainment of one’s goals (self-interests), often in the context of others” (Dehili, Prevatt, & Coffman, 2017, p. 568). There appears to be consensus on how widely executive functioning influences behavior yet defining and measuring executive functioning skill levels has been challenging.

To deepen researcher’s ability to identify executive functioning challenges, Barkley (2011) developed the Barkley Deficits in Executive Functioning Scale (BDEFS) establishing a multidimensional method of analysis. The BDEFS measures skills across five different domains, including “Self-Management to Time, Self-Organization/Problem Solving, Self-Restraint/Inhibition, Self-Motivation, and Self-Regulation of Emotions” (Dehili, Prevatt, & Coffman, 2017, p. 568). These domains may also be important for graduating high school students to be aware of.

A college student relies on executive functioning (EF) skills for many daily tasks, such as the organization and prioritization of information, and the regulation of impulsivity and behavior. Poor executive functioning skills have been negatively associated with academic success (Knouse, Feldman, & Blevins, 2014; Weyandt, Oster, Gudmundsdottir, DuPaul & Anastopoulos, 2017). Executive functioning skills are often identified as an area of challenge for students with ADHD, Learning Disabilities, and Autism. Transitioning from high school to college presents new barriers for students with disabilities affecting EF. Even when symptoms of ADHD level off or decline in high school, young adulthood brings new challenges where impairment level may

increase. Such challenges may be social in nature, employment related, and legal in nature (Barkley, 2016; Barkley & Fischer, 2011).

Executive functioning challenges may be considered an area of challenge for students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD. One of the neurodevelopmental disorders described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, pp. 31-86), *autism spectrum disorder (ASD)* refers to a continuum of conditions involving challenges with “social communication and social interactions across multiple contexts” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 31). Prior to 2013, older versions of the DSM included the separate, but similar conditions of Asperger’s disorder, autism, and pervasive developmental disorder (PDD). In the most recent version, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) collapsed the three, separate neurodevelopmental conditions into one spectrum, entitled autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The authors’ goal was to “improve the sensitivity and specificity of the criteria...and to identify more focused treatment targets (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. xlii).”

Social communication and social interaction challenges may be exemplified by eye contact that does not match up to cultural norms, a lack of response to conversation, or very few attempts to initiate any conversation with another person. An individual adult displaying repetitive patterns of behavior may pace, flap his or her hands, or make other physical gestures repeatedly. Along the continuum, ASD is marked by the person’s ability to manage and respond to changes in the environment around them, showing a preference for routine. More severe conditions along the continuum include apparent distress in response to changes in routine or requests to alter the person’s focus.

Additionally, ASD has a high rate of co-occurrence with other neurodevelopmental disorders (e.g., ADHD) and with other conditions in general (e.g., anxiety, depression), which can complicate and further create uniqueness between individual diagnoses (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

According to the Center for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov), research articles about ASD began to circulate in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, reported cases numbered at 4-5 cases per 10,000 children. More recently, the CDC estimated that prevalence of ASD is 1 in 68 children under 8 years old. Gender differences in prevalence have been recorded. The CDC estimated reports of ASD in 1 in 42 boys, versus 1 in 189 girls under 8 years old (Christensen, Baio, Braun, et al., 2012). This is a difference of 4 ½ times greater prevalence in boys.

There has been much speculation about why ASD has increased so drastically in the U.S. In the news, and in the community, one might hear of concerns about vaccinations, pollution, or other environmental influences. The CDC has asserted that studies have not revealed a relationship between vaccinations and ASD (www.cdc.gov). Genetic and other medical conditions may be a factor (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In their study examining diagnostic trends related to an increase in the disorder, versus replacements of other disorders as diagnoses are updated, Dave and Fernandez (2015) studied changes in the demand for “auxiliary health providers (e.g., speech pathologist, behavioral therapist, etc.)” in the State of California (p. 449). The authors concluded that there was an increase in the prevalence of ASD and proposed that between 50-65% of diagnoses appeared to reflect an increase in “true prevalence” (Dave & Fernandez, 2015, p. 448).

A diagnosis of ASD has a broad impact on the individual and includes economic repercussions for the individual and their families. Individuals frequently have health, mental health, educational, social, and employment challenges associated with a diagnosis of ASD. The cost of care for a child with ASD, versus a child without ASD, has been estimated at 85%-550% higher (Roux, Rast, Anderson, and Shattuck, 2017).

Roux, Rast, Anderson, and Shattuck (2017) examined the lives of individuals with ASD across the U.S., who were utilizing state developmental disability services. The study sample of 3,520 survey responses revealed differences in diagnosis correlating to age. Approximately 51% of the middle-aged adults also had a severe (I.Q. score 25-40) or profound (IQ score less than 25) intellectual disability, versus only 16% of adults between the ages of 18-24 with ASD. In this study, 54% of individuals also had at least one psychiatric condition (e.g., anxiety, depression) and 51% had at least one additional health condition. The economic impact of ASD was apparent; only 14% of survey respondents reported having paid employment in their communities (Roux, Rast, Anderson, and Shattuck, 2017).

The growth of ASD as a diagnosis among children in the U.S. has been so dramatic that a response across many facets of society is well documented. Various government agencies, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (www.hhs.gov), the U.S. Department of Education (www.ed.gov) and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov) are federal entities with web pages devoted to ASD. Non-governmental agencies have been frequently formed by family members or with a mission to support families affected by ASD. Examples of these

organizations include Autism Speaks (www.autismspeaks.org) and Autism Now (www.autismnow.org).

Many non-governmental organizations have drawn attention to the medicalized and deficit-based nature of the ASD diagnosis, advocating instead for ASD acceptance in society. Autism Speaks has developed and posted their own documentaries highlighting the high cost of medical care for families affected by ASD, the complexities of mental health issues related to ASD, and the challenges for individuals identifying with a high-functioning ASD diagnosis. Other related films are referenced on the Autism Speaks website (<https://www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/resource-library/films-and-documentaries>).

Students with Autism in U.S. Higher Education

Students with disabilities, identified as 10.9% of the nation-wide enrolled student population in 2007-2008 increased to 11.1% of the same student population in 2010-2011 (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016, p. 516). The exact number of students with a diagnosis on the ASD spectrum who enroll in college is difficult to determine (Highlen, 2017). Some scholars point to Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimates of the growing prevalence of ASD diagnoses for children as an indicator of an anticipated rise in college students reporting a diagnosis of ASD (Brown & Coomes, 2016; Hendrickson, Woods-Groves, Rodgers, and Datchuk, 2017). Research by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) explored college attendance among individuals now out of high school up to 8 years. NCES research estimated 46.6% of individuals with a diagnosis of ASD reported attending any type of college. Within that group, 32.6%

reported enrollment at a 2-year institution of higher education; a higher number than 4-year or vocational/technical institutions (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016, p. 815).

In their analysis of 2008-2009 college enrollments, Raue and Lewis (2011) concluded 70% of public community colleges reported enrolling students with ASD. Of all institutions of higher education examined, those with enrollments of 10,000 or more students enrolled the highest number of students (84%) identifying with a diagnosis of ASD (Raue & Lewis, 2011, p. 18). Although more students enrolled in public 4-year universities (12,131,436) than in public 2-year colleges (6,971,378) in the Fall 2008 semester (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow, 2016, p. 429), enrollments of students with disabilities at 2-year public colleges accounted for approximately half of the 707,000 students with disabilities who enrolled in college during the 2007-2008 academic year (Raue & Lewis, 2011). Therefore, students with disabilities tend to enroll more frequently in 2-year community colleges, and especially in the larger community colleges.

Community colleges are known to be affordable and accessible post-secondary options. The same features attractive to students without a disability are important to students with ASD. Located close to home and family, students with ASD can choose to live at home where they can benefit from a familiar structure and emotional support of their families (Hendrickson, Woods-Groves, Rodgers, & Datchuk, 2017). Community colleges are open-enrollment institutions, offering numerous supports for students with remedial needs and a wide variety of levels of academic preparedness, and a high number of short-term, workforce degree options – all of which make college more manageable for students with disabilities (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012).

Despite the many advantages to community colleges, students with disabilities, including those with ASD, are at a high risk for dropping out. The ADA Act of 2008 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 require publicly funded institutions of higher education to provide academic adjustments and auxiliary aids to individuals with disabilities (ADA Amendments Act of 2008, Rehabilitation Act Section 504, 1973). Examples of the most commonly provided accommodations include extended time on exams, classroom note-takers, copies of instructor notes / PowerPoints, help with study skills, alternative examination formatting, and assistive technology options (Raue & Lewis, 2011). Although such academic adjustments can be helpful, first year college students with disabilities encounter more than academic challenges. In addition to college level academic demands, first year college students are also encountering the new social demands and responsibilities associated with young adulthood.

Brown and Coomes (2016), also concluded the majority of accommodations provided by institutions of higher education had a “clear academic focus,” including accommodations such as the provision of a note-taker or a digital recorder, quiet testing area, and extended time for exams (p. 470). Scholars argue that basic academic adjustments like the ones noted above do not provide enough support for students with ASD (Anderson & Butt, 2017; Longtin, 2014). Such academic adjustments may also reinforce the medical or functional deficit model focus “on the impairment as located within the student” instead of considering changes in the learning environment itself (Brown & Coomes, 2016, p. 476).

For almost a decade, a national solution to post-secondary education options for students with ASD and other intellectual disabilities has been promoted by the U.S.

Department of Education. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education awarded 27 separate \$500,000 grants (CFDA 84.407A) to public community colleges and institutions of higher education “to create or expand high quality, inclusive model comprehensive transition and postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disabilities” (<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/tpsid/funding.html>). Grant projects run for 5-year periods, and colleges are required to plan how to institutionalize the programs and associated costs. Twenty-seven more grants were awarded again in 2017.

As of 2015-2016, grant-funded TPSID’s included 10 community college sites and 34 4-year university locations and were serving a total of 449 students (Grigal, Hart, Papay, Domin, & Smith, 2017). These grants have also funded a national organization, Think College National Coordinating Center, charged with “providing support, coordination, training, and evaluation services” for the grant-funded programs (<https://thinkcollege.net/about/what-is-think-college/think-college-national-coordinating-center>). The financial investment made by the U.S. Department of Education to supply academia with model programs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities is an indicator of the national perception that (a) students with a diagnosis such as ASD, are increasingly choosing to attend college and (b) traditional college environments do not typically have the resources in place to adequately support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Similar information about the lack of institutional resources has been highlighted by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). During the 2015 legislative session, Senator Judith Zaffarini (<http://www.senate.texas.gov/member.php?d=21>) authored a bill that required “the Texas

Higher Education Coordinating Board to collect and study data on the participation of persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities at public institutions of higher education.” SB 37, and HB 1807, also co-authored by Senator Zaffarini, became laws, ensuring, for the first time, that the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) would collect institutional data about individuals meeting the Board’s definition of intellectual developmental disability (IDD). Additionally, the Board will create and maintain a website for families presenting all programs offered for such students at public institutions of higher education in Texas, and the Board will collect data on the recruitment efforts and resources available at such colleges.

In their 2016 Report on the Recruitment of Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities at Public Institutions of Higher Education in Texas, THECB (2016) noted that only 25% of institutions responding to their survey indicated they made some level of effort to recruit to individuals with IDD. Limitations to recruiting efforts included: a lack of institutional resources dedicated to recruiting with students with disabilities, lack of transportation for students to get to campus, under-preparedness of potential students, and lack of financial aid opportunities for specially designed transitional programs not authorized to accept federal financial aid (THECB, 2016).

The U.S. Department of Education funded transition programs and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board study of students with intellectual disabilities signal a growing awareness at the state and federal level of the increased need for colleges to understand the needs of students with ASD and other intellectual disabilities. Unfortunately, specialized programs tend to be expensive, staff-intensive programs. This is not surprising, given the high level of support provided by teachers, counselors,

transition coordinators, and other professionals in K-12 educational settings. The high level of support and structure provided throughout K-12 frequently enabled students to demonstrate academic mastery and graduate.

The differences between high school supports for students with disabilities and college accommodations are well known, and frequently referred to openly on college websites. Many colleges refer students to the U.S. Department of Education's document on transitioning out of high school

(<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>) to assist students who are transitioning from high school to college. Roux, Rast, Anderson, and Shattuck (2017) have referred to the sudden loss of supports experienced by graduating high school students with ASD as the "services cliff" (p. 29). Because legislative and service differences occurring between high school and college are significant, many transitional or specialized programs attempt to bridge this gap by blending more professional support than typical at a college with theories that emphasize concepts like individual responsibility, self-advocacy, and self-determination, which are necessary skills for young adults. Similarly, some colleges are integrating the concept of grit (Duckworth, 2007; Stoltz, 2014) into their curriculum (www.gritinstitute.com/grit-research-2/).

Critical Disability Theory

Critical Disability theory (CDT) serves as a foundational critical lens in this area of study. Tenets of critical disability theory come from *critical social theory* (CST), which is traced back to the Institute of Social Research in Germany, during the 1930s (Agger, 1991; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). Four themes are commonly associated with CST. The first theme is the rejection of positivism; a rejection of the assertion by

natural sciences that there is one objective reality (Evans, N. J., Broido, E. M., Brown, K.R., & Wilke, A. K., 2017; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). Second, there is an acknowledgement of the human struggle for both independence and inclusion in society (Evans, N. J., Broido, E. M., Brown, K.R., & Wilke, A. K., 2017; Foucault, 1982; Pezdek & Rasinski, 2017; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). This awareness allows for an examination of power in society, including *power knowledge operations* or *subjectivity* (Foucault, 1982) — an exploration of the types and forms power which may be expressed in society (Pezdek & Rasinski, 2017, p.2). Dynamics of power, and the examination of who holds and implements knowledge, are important elements of CST because these dynamics contribute to, reinforce, and influence emerging social constructs.

A third theme associated with CST is the idea that social theory includes a goal of promoting positive social change, and therefore an awareness of historical context is necessary to understand preceding events and ideologies. Yet, CST also recognizes that social theory simultaneously rests within a current historical context that shapes how we understand our existence today and affects how to envision change. Therefore, there is always a need for social theorists to be reflective and observant of both historical and current context (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017).

Finally, a fourth theme of CST is the need for dialogue to occur between diverse groups and cultures to effect positive social change (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017). Enduring social constructs, such as ableism, have the potential to create a sense of *false consciousness* within the society. In CST, *false consciousness* refers to situations where society begins to perceive a social structure as “both inevitable and rational” (Agger, 1991). The danger of false consciousness is that not only the general public, but also

those most vulnerable (i.e., individuals with disabilities) deeply believe dominant theories. Over time, it becomes difficult for all segments of society to imagine or pursue a different reality (Agger, 1991).

Pothier and Devlin (2006) are recognized for expanding critical social theory (CST) to include those with disabilities (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017, p. 177) – becoming *critical disability theory (CDT)*. Motivated by their experiences advocating for individuals with disabilities in Canadian legal and political domains, the authors describe the concept of critical disability theory broadly, elaborating on four areas to examine through this critical lens, including: “(a) language, definitions, and voice, (b) contextual politics and the politics of responsibility and accountability; (c) philosophical challenges; and (d) citizenship / dis-citizenship” (Pothier & Devlin, 2006, p. 2). Language is a “primary concern” of critical disability theory (Pothier & Devlin 2006, p. 3). How we define and place parameters around the term disability has an impact on individual, professional, and societal behaviors, including the creation and implementation of law, policies and procedures.

Critical disability theory has extremely intentional components, including the deliberate politicization of the theory in order for it to be transformative in nature and not just theoretical (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017; Pothier & Devlin, 2006). This deliberate politicization is deemed necessary in order to alter dominant perspectives. Foucault (1982) asserted “power relations are rooted in the system of social networks” (p. 793). Institutions of higher education represent entities of power (Foucault, 1982). Devlin and Pothier (2006) reported that through both policies and procedures most colleges still operate through a medical model – where disability is viewed as an

individual deficit. Institutions of higher education are also places where individuals can participate in knowledge production (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012); an action related to having and gaining power.

To effect positive social change, discussions about the perceived rigidity of the social concept of disability must include all stakeholders, including those at varying levels of power. Students, instructors, administrators and policy makers must “critically examine their own assumptions regarding difference” (Hutcheon, & Wolbring, 2012, p. 47). Individuals identified with powerful roles in higher education have been called upon to reduce the stigma surrounding disabilities on campus (Thompson-Ebanks, 2014). Critical disability theory provides a framework for all stakeholders to understand the complex layers involved in understanding the experience of disability in the United States, and in higher education, today.

Grit in Higher Education

The construct of grit serves as a second conceptual framework in this study. Prior to the emergence of grit, researchers explored many non-cognitive factors associated with talent and achievement. Described as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals,” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007, p. 1087), the construct of grit was introduced and refined through Duckworth’s (2016) continuing efforts to study “something so intangible” (p. 8) as the “concept that measures what talent alone cannot predict; the extent to which you approach life with grit” (p. 9).

Studies conducted by Duckworth (2016) and others on grit (Duckworth, Eichstaedt & Ungar; 2015; Duckworth, A., & Gross, 2014; Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Bernstein, & Anders Ericsson, 2011) have examined the factors influencing

achievement within challenging settings where traits such as talent, intelligence or aptitude alone did not consistently predict success. Examples of such settings included a boot camp at West Point (Duckworth, et al., 2007) and a spelling bee (Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein, & Anders-Ericsson, 2011).

Although studies around grit have often been conducted within group settings (e.g., spelling bee participants, athletes, West Point cadets, primary school students), the focus of grit is on the individual. Duckworth, Eichstaedt, and Ungar (2015) described a “Newtonian model of achievement” (p. 360). Comparing the process of achievement to Newtonian classical mechanics, the authors proposed a formula for achievement as (Duckworth, Eichstaedt, and Ungar, 2015, p. 361):

$$achievement = \frac{1}{2} \cdot talent \cdot effort^2$$

In this formula, “achievement is the multiplicative product of skill and effort (Duckworth, Eichstaedt, and Ungar, 2015, p. 359). Duckworth (2016) wrote “effort counts into the calculations *twice*, not once. Effort builds skill. At the very same time, effort makes skill productive” (p. 42).

Stoltz’s (2014) concept of grit was also behaviorally focused. Stoltz (2014) described grit as the “capacity to dig deep, to do whatever it takes – especially struggle, sacrifice, even suffer – to achieve your most worthy goals” (p. 2). Stoltz (2014) identified four dimensions of grit and Stoltz asserted each dimension “stands on its own...and each contributes to the overall GRIT™ construct” (p. 20). These dimensions are growth, resilience, instinct, and tenacity (Stoltz, 2014, p. 20).

Stoltz (2014) claimed *growth* is one of the more difficult behaviors to develop during trying times. Growth has been described as a person’s “propensity to seek and

consider new ideas, additional alternative, different approaches, and fresh perspectives (Stoltz, 2014, p. 20). Stoltz (2014) also likened *growth* to another term coined by Dweck (2006), called *mindset*. Dweck (2006) described *growth mindset* as being “based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts: (p. 7). While Dweck (2006) explored growth from the perspective of child development, Stoltz (2014) focused on work with adults on goal attainment. Both Dweck’s (2006) and Stoltz’s (2014) research results supported their claims that skills relating to a growth mindset could be developed. By developing a growth mindset, an individual might be more likely to maintain motivation in the face of adversity.

Resilience is another term that may be associated with reactions to adversity. Stoltz (2014) referred to resilience as “your capacity to respond constructively and ideally make good use of all kinds of adversity” (p. 20). The final two components of grit, as defined by Stoltz (2014), included *instinct* and *tenacity*. Stoltz (2014) declared that instinct was the dimension that has been “uniformly missing from the entire conversation on grit” (p. 28). Instinct was described as “your gut-level capacity to pursue the right goals in the best and smartest ways” (Stoltz, 2014, p. 28). The addition of instinct as a component of grit differentiates efforts that are persistent from efforts that are both persistent and smart – or *optimal*. Tenacity, or the “degree to which you persist, commit to, stick with, and relentlessly work at whatever you choose to achieve,” is the final building block of Stoltz’s GRIT™ construct (Stoltz, 2014, p. 20). Another behaviorally focused dimension, tenacity as a grit tool, may be applied frequently or more intentionally to effect change over time (e.g., long term plan to achieve economic or educational goals).

Through a self-assessment tool developed by Stoltz (2014), readers of his books can also participate in an online grit survey. Scores of grit and associated dimensions provide a current numerical value for each component and an overall score. Each score, through strategic intervention, could be developed to the point that retesting will elicit new, possibly improved scores. Like Stoltz's (2014) GRIT™ gauge, a 12-item self-report grit scale created by Duckworth and her colleagues, has also demonstrated strong predictive value in research settings (Duckworth, 2016).

Scales measuring grit have drawn criticism (Stokas, 2015; Willingham, 2016) because of their reliance on self-report. Grit's hyper-focus on individual effort has also attracted critiques over the application of grit-oriented interventions at a large scale, such as the use of grit interventions in the comparison of school performance at local or national levels. Grit has been referred to as a *non-cognitive disposition* -referring to the "capacity of an individual to act, feel, and think in ways associated with a set of culturally recognizable qualities" (Stokas, 2015, p. 514). Stokas (2015) critiqued work on grit because of its heavy emphasis on individual effort and the potential for grit theories to disregard "social hardships" and "systemic inequalities" in the United States (p. 515). There is the possibility that those who have grit, also believe they have the power to assert change in their lives. However, individuals experiencing social inequities may not be as likely to demonstrate grit. One such inequity is the unequal distribution of educational and economic resources, which are experienced in many school districts around the country.

Willingham (2016) expressed cautious support of grit in educational settings, pointing out the grit scale developed by Duckworth et al (2007) was created "as a

research instrument, not for college admissions” (p. 31). Willingham (2016) supported the linkage between grit and passion, raising the idea of teaching grit to help students identify goals they are passionate about, and learning how grit could be applied to achieve those goals. Like Stokas (2015), Willingham (2016) also cautioned educational leaders and those making policy should remember institutional barriers, such as “poverty and under-funded schools” (p. 31).

Similarly, Anderson, Turner, Heath and Payne (2016) also reviewed criticisms of grit, noting the emphasis on the individual, discrepancies in how grit is measured and in methods of studying grit, and the lack of recognition of systemic or structural factors in the demonstration of grit. Grit has been associated with other concepts (e.g., hope, alienation, resilience, locus of control) which “all share a concern with attitudes toward the future and one’s capacity to affect it (Anderson, Turner, Heath & Payne, 2016, p. 200). In discussing the importance of remembering how individuals interact with structural factors, Anderson, et al., (2016) recommended grit might be best understood as an element within a “family of ideas related to alienation” (p. 214-215). In this way, the importance of alienation and a possible sense of powerlessness might not be lost or forgotten amidst discussions about individual ratings on grit, or educational success standards involving grit.

Although Duckworth, Eichstaedt, and Ungar (2015) mention the possible influence of situational factors on effort and talent, their list of talent traits and effort traits are still individual-focused (e.g., emotional intelligence, goal commitment, grit) and there is no mention of the type of situational factors that might influence such traits. Duckworth (2016) argued that her theory does not include external influence because her

focus is on the “psychology of achievement (p. 42). Duckworth (2016) added that her theory is “incomplete” because “psychology is not all that matters” (p. 42). The increase in national attention on grit has therefore created a dilemma for researchers who have advocated for the study of grit and the potential it has to better understand successful individuals.

Debates on requiring character building (e.g., grit) interventions to improve poorly performing schools are happening nationwide. In 2015 and 2016, Duckworth came forward publicly (NPR, 2016) and through academic research (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015) to clarify that she does not recommend the grit scale for use in high-stakes testing situations or “between-school accountability judgements” (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015, p. 237). Instead, Duckworth & Yeager (2015) call for the development of new methods of conducting rigorous program evaluations and identification of new ways to facilitate “practice improvement” (p. 245).

Summary

This chapter presented a literature review for the purpose of establishing the context of the current study within existing academic studies. Understanding disability in the U.S. today requires examination of how models of disability theory have changed throughout history. Engaging critical disability theory is another way to understand disability within the political and social context we live in today. Despite evolution in disability models, there is still a strong deficit-focused perception of disability prevalent in U.S. society – including in the areas of healthcare, policy, and education. It is within this context that high schools are graduating an increasing number of students who have a diagnosis involving challenges in executive functioning skills. Annually, more college-

bound students who are used to receiving academic support related to their disability are choosing community colleges that are affordable and close to home so that they have access to natural supports.

Community colleges in the U.S. welcome the highest numbers of individuals with disabilities, yet often have the least amount of program support and training in place. Student success is a hot topic at all levels of academia. At the national level, the concept of grit (Duckworth, 2016) has been considered as a potential intervention strategy in the K-12 environment. Community colleges – through a parallel discourse on college completion – are considering innovative programs to foster student success, including first year experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and on the development of strength-based non-cognitive skills, such as grit (Stoltz, 2014). Unfortunately, many studies and interventions do not mention or overtly involve students with disabilities, including those affecting executive functioning skills. More research is needed to understand and learn from the experiences of students with disabilities who participate in college completion interventions and formalized student success strategies, including intentional curriculum-enhancements.

CHAPTER III

Method

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study was to explore the experiences of community college students with executive functioning challenges, who participated in a grit-enhanced curriculum. The research question guiding this study was: How do community college students, diagnosed with executive functioning challenges, describe their experiences with a grit-enhanced transitional college program? Phases of data collection were based on Creswell's (2013) *data collection circle* and included (a) identification of the site; (b) access and rapport-building with key stakeholders; (c) purposeful, criterion sampling; (d) data collection; (e) recording information; (f) addressing issues occurring in the field; (g) resolving any field concerns; and (h) the storing of data.

Once collected, I used a thematic approach to analyzing data using first and second coding cycles to facilitate the emergence of interpreted themes (Saldaña, 2016). Experiences of each student participant were explored and analyzed, using *descriptive case study* and *cross-case synthesis* methods (Yin, 2014). A comprehensive framework of theoretical concepts informed my research and included critical disability theory (Pothier & Devlin, 2006) and grit theory (Duckworth, 2007; Stoltz, 2014) examined within the context of disability in the United States.

Context of the Study

The case context (Yin, 2014) was a continuing education transitional program designed specifically for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other conditions affecting executive functioning. A grit-enhanced curriculum was an integrated

part of the community college transitional program, which was offered at a 2-year public community college located in the Southern United States. The community college system, where the college campus program examined is located, spanned a geographical area of over 1,400 square miles and was adjacent to a metropolitan area home to at least 2.3 million people. In the Fall 2018 semester, 89,150 credit students were enrolled across six main college campuses, multiple satellite centers, and two university centers. The system-wide student population consisted of approximately 40% Hispanic, 30% White, 15% Black, 8% Asian, and 7% Other, as self-reported by enrolled students. The majority of students (60.5%) were female, under age 25 (71.7%), and enrolled part-time (70%) in academic courses (84%). Within this student body 2,257 students registered for services to accommodate a disability in the Fall 2018 semester.

The participating college where the grit program was offered is a suburban campus located north of a large metropolitan area, in a city with over 11,000 residents. At the time of this study, the community college campus enrolled 9,703 credit students. Demographics of student enrollment in Fall 2018 were described as approximately: 32% Hispanic, 43% White, 13% Black, 6% Asian, and 6% Other. The majority of students (64%) were women, under age 25 (66%), and enrolled part-time (71%) in academic courses (84%). Within this student body, 278 students registered for services to accommodate a disability in the Fall 2018 semester.

Grit strategies at the college. During the 2014-2015 academic year, administrators at the participating college campus began exploring new strategies to identify and achieve enrollment and student success targets. Faculty and staff began to learn about the concepts of *growth mindset* (Dweck, 2006) and *grit* (Duckwork, 2016;

Stoltz, 2014). College leaders engaged in a variety of professional development activities (e.g., book clubs, workshops, speaking events) that led to the development of grit initiatives for the college. Additionally, the college initiated an annual Grit Summit in 2015. A result of these activities was the development of a grit-enhanced curriculum, which included behaviorally-focused strategies designed to teach students how to identify and develop grit to facilitate their functioning and student achievement (Stoltz, 2014). Later in 2015, the college participated in a rigorous, experimental design study to examine the effect of a grit-focused curriculum on student success. Since then, administrators and faculty have engaged in a program evaluation process to monitor results for continuous improvement. Ideally, this study adds to that continuous improvement process.

Leaders at the community college where this study was situated have espoused a strong commitment to combatting a “deficit narrative” of student success and, to demonstrate this commitment, have incorporated grit-based strategies into their efforts (Nutt & Hardman, 2019). College efforts have continued to integrate grit beyond the curriculum and into the culture of the college through an intentional, phased approach. College leadership began phase one with a focus on learning about the grit framework and developing grit as a strategy for student success. Then, a two-year focus on integrating grit into multiple aspects of college life ensued. This grit-focused work addressed instruction, professional development, student support services, and the transitional program for students with disabilities affecting executive functioning skills. In scaling up the grit focus, college leaders planned to align grit strategies with the larger community college system’s focus on shifting organizational culture. Through this work,

college leaders are created a “beliefs agenda” designed to help “more students overcome adversity, cope with challenges, and finish what they start” (Nutt & Hardman, 2019, p. 36).

Community college transitional program. In August 2015, the college campus launched a new program designed specifically for students with disabilities that affect executive functioning skills, including students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Program enrollment, which began with a cohort of eight students, reached 80 students during the Fall 2018 semester. This 4-year, transitional program began by integrating students into the physical space and culture of the community college campus. For example, the program is located on the main campus of the community college to ensure that students in the transitional program had equal opportunity to engage in all college programs and services offered at the main campus (e.g., student government, student life clubs, intramural sports, use of the library, tutoring). Students were accepted into the program one time per year only, using a cohort approach to build a social network each student could rely on.

The community college transitional program did not employ its own admissions staff or advisors. Students in the transitional program followed the same class registration procedures as all other students at the community college, with some additional guidance from the program administrator and faculty. Registration procedures common to all students at the community college included orientation classes, meeting with an academic advisor, learning to register online, and visiting the business office or the financial aid office for financial planning purposes. Students in the community college transitional program also accessed the same student support services, such as

contacting a counselor when needed and registering with the disability services office for specific needs, such as assistive technology needs. In these ways, the community college transitional program provided intentional support, and simultaneously fostered inclusive college experiences for enrolled students.

The community college transitional program was designed to provide more than an academic experience for enrolled students. Program and college leaders together created a unique, specially designed curriculum which interlinked social skills and workplace readiness skills into universally designed academic curriculum. The program was designed to develop a wide variety of student skills over 4-year period, allowing for repetition, progression of skills, application through practice, and expansion of curriculum topics.

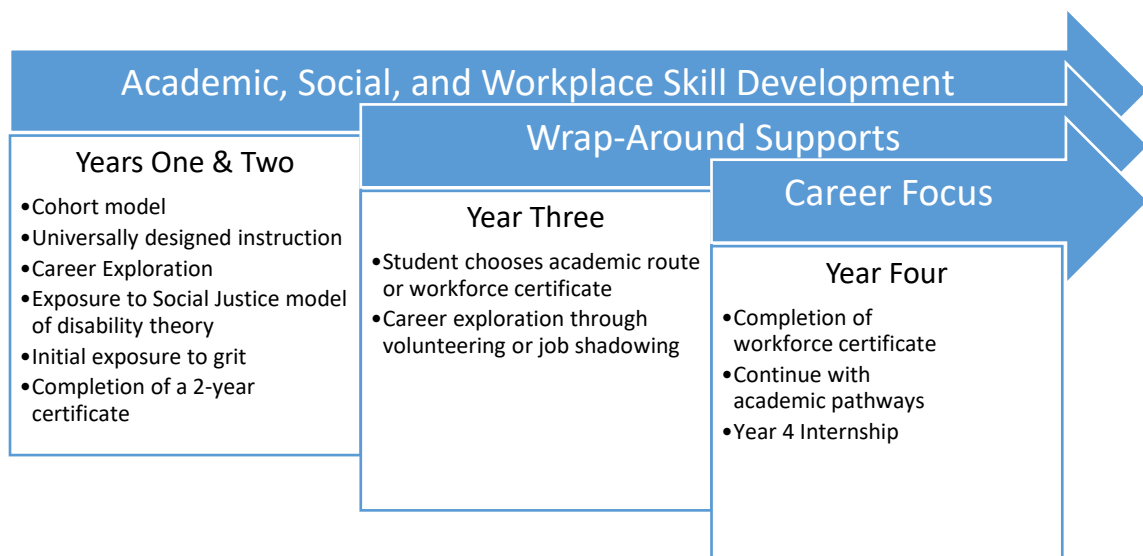


Figure 1. Program figure for the community college transitional program. Figure illustrates the phased approach of the 4-year program, elements continuing throughout the program, and highlights of program aspects by year.

As noted in Figure 1, a gradually unfolding workforce pathway began in Year 1 and focused on exploring students' career interests and personal skills. This workforce

pathway continued with opportunities for students to volunteer and job shadow in subsequent years and culminated in a fourth-year internship. Upon completing Years 1 and 2, students received a certification of completion and faculty advisors worked with students to guide them in continuation of the program.

Students returning after completion of Year 2 have two plan options to consider. Both plans include access to *wrap-around* supports. *Wrap-around* support is a phrase commonly heard in the mental health field, which refers to gathering various resources together around an individual for helping the individual meet their identified wellness goals (Ferris & Conroy, 2016). In a mental health setting, those wrap-around supports might include individuals who offer counseling, housing, economic, and medical assistance to the same individual. By working together, they can more effectively manage obstacles to shared goals.

Although not commonly heard in higher education, wrap-around supports in an educational setting work similarly to those in mental health. At the participating community college, college resources are identified for supporting the student in achieving his or her program goals. The adjustment of faculty course workload distribution, allowing time for faculty to also serve as advisors to their students, is an example of how a piece of wrap-around support can be created in the context of higher education. Additionally, tutors, counselors, advisors, financial aid staff, and any other employees working with the student may be gathered together by a support lead, should the need arise to offer additional support or guidance to the student.

In the community college transitional program, students choose from one of two paths in Years 3 and 4. Both paths allow access to the wrap-around support services. On

one path, students would identify their academic pathway of credit courses and begin taking those courses with the additional supports of the community college transitional program included. Alternatively, a student would choose to pursue a universally-designed workforce credit certificate program, which also included wrap-around program supports. Both options included an opportunity for students to participate in supported internship placements during Year 4.

Grit in the community college transitional program. In Fall 2016, as the community college was beginning to learn about and adopt grit strategies (Duckworth, 2016; Stoltz, 2014), college leaders made a decision to include the transitional program into college-wide grit integration plans. During the first two years of the grit-enhanced program, all members of each cohort of students participated in the same non-credit curriculum focused on social and academic skills, understanding disability models, introduction to the grit framework, and career exploration activities. Each semester, students in the transitional program were introduced to grit through videos, assignments, and story-telling. Students also took the GRIT™ Gauge (Stoltz, 2014), an online survey assessing current grit levels. This assessment was offered at no cost to the student, and scores were obtained at both the beginning and ending of the fall semester.

Although the concept of grit in education has been criticized by some, at the participating community college students were taught about grit from the perspective that they already had it. This is the strengths-based approach the college chose to take. Classroom activities (e.g., story-telling, producing grit videos) were designed to allow students to reflect on their individual journeys - especially the journey of getting into college - and to notice when and where they have seen grit in their lives. Adopting a *Grit*

2.0 perspective (Stoltz, 2014), the college's grit-enhanced curriculum was about more than measuring the quantity of grit. The college prioritized quality of grit over quantity, because the "quality [of grit] can matter more" (Stoltz, 2014, p. 19). Through the Grit 2.0 perspective, the individual's goal is to seek *optimal grit*, or the ability to "consistently and reliably demonstrate your fullest grit to achieve your most worthy goals" (Stoltz, 2014).

Participant Selection

A challenge to conducting research about students with disabilities is the difficulty of identifying participants. In the process of "operationalizing disability," it is important to understand that disability "is framed within a context of many intersections, including the individual characteristics of one or more conditions, personal identity and experiences, and the sociopolitical nature of disabilities" (Vaccaro, Kimball, Wells, & Ostiguy, 2015, p. 29). Another challenge to conducting research about students with disabilities is the importance of ensuring participant safety, empowerment, and choice. Consequently, to enhance student participant confidentiality and sense of safety and choice, I frequently communicated with a gatekeeper who was one of the campus disabilities coordinators. I believed this was essential to ensuring that student participant rights were protected.

In this study, the gatekeeper worked in a dedicated capacity in the transitional program. She was familiar with the students and had led curriculum development for the program. She was able to assist students in understanding and self-selecting into the study. Additionally, she identified faculty members who could assist with communicating to students about the study. The consent process included both

information for potential participants and parents, because parental involvement was a hallmark of the program. Students who were invited to participate in the study often also shared consent information with their parents or guardians. As the transitional program lead, the gatekeeper had regular contact with the students' parents. This ongoing communication with both study participants and their parents created natural opportunities for participants to speak with the gatekeeper, if the student decided they were not comfortable going directly to the researcher. Therefore, students had multiple ways of expressing concerns or stating any desires to discontinue their participation in the study.

Defining a student population too broadly erroneously assumes all students with disabilities share the same experiences. A desired objective of this research was to “achieve understanding” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 549) of the experiences of this specific group of students. For the implementation of this study to result in the desired understanding, I based participant selection on both conceptual frameworks and the practical need to identify multiple individuals (i.e., community college students with challenges in executive functioning) experiencing the same phenomena (i.e., participation in a grit-enhanced curriculum). This type of participant selection logic is a hallmark of case study design (Yin, 2014), where the goal is to identify cases that “predict similar results” or that “predict contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons” (p. 57).

In addition to being enrolled in the same community college transitional program, students participating in this study shared a common theme within their different psychological diagnoses; each student had a diagnosis of a condition known to affect executive functioning skills, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Each student

enrolled in the grit-enhanced community college transitional program was engaged actively in building social, academic, and workplace skills needed to achieve personal and professional goals. Active engagement was evidenced through a sophisticated student feedback and evaluation program developed by the program administrator. Faculty, also serving as advisors, met regularly with the administrator and with students throughout the year to discuss student attendance, completion of required activities and assignments, progress made academically, and progress in developing social and workplace skills. By limiting programs admissions to only one time per year, adhering to a cohort model, and relying on faculty as advisors, the transitional program has been able to continue providing students with regular and detailed feedback, despite enrollment increases.

Participant Selection Criteria. Purposeful sampling is recommended in qualitative studies so researchers can select participants and locations expected to yield a robust understanding of the “research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). Criterion sampling, a type of purposeful sampling where all *cases* match a same or similar criterion, was utilized to identify students in the study (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the term *case* (Yin, 2014) referred to an individual student with a condition affecting executive functioning skills, who was enrolled in the grit-enhanced community college transitional program between Fall 2016 and Spring 2019 semesters. As part of participation in the program, each student participant also had completed an initial survey to determine and understand their grit scores (Stoltz, 2014). Students were then taught grit theory and engaged in activities designed to be integrated into their regular coursework. These lessons were designed to increase students’

awareness of their own grit traits. Later in the same semester, students were provided with an opportunity to retake the grit survey and examine changes in their grit scores (Stoltz, 2014). Using these boundaries for participation in the study, students who had completed at least two semesters in courses designed to include grit theory and activities were identified by a gatekeeper and invited to volunteer their participation in this research study.

Although some variation exists regarding a recommended number of participants in a qualitative case study, Creswell (2013) proposed that as few as four students could yield enough descriptive information to reach saturation in identifying themes from data collected. Therefore, I anticipated that multiple interviews with at least four students could produce sufficient data to reach saturation in my analysis of collected data. The final group of students selected for participation in this case study had the following characteristics in common: (a) identification as an individual with a condition affecting executive functioning skills; (b) participation in the same community college transitional program utilizing grit-enhanced curriculum during the specified time frame; and, (c) demonstration of exposure to grit, as confirmed by the gatekeeper.

Data Collection

Data collection has been described as a “series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information” (Creswell, 2013, p. 146). Gathering information for research is not a linear process; some activities may overlap. Because of the possibility of overlap, using rigorous methods of data collection is key to ensuring trustworthiness and reliability. Yin (2014) recommended four principles of data collection for the purpose of “establishing the construct validity and reliability of the evidence” (p. 118).

These four principles included (a) the use of multiple sources of evidence, (b) utilization of a case study database, (c) maintenance of a chain of evidence and (4) cautious use of electronic sources (Yin, 2014). Yin's (2014) four principles are incorporated throughout the data collection phases described below.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the best method for collecting the individual stories of students with disabilities who were enrolled in a specially designed program of study. Bold (2012) contended researchers must consider "fitness for purpose" (p. 94) throughout all phases of research. I conducted three semi-structured interviews with each participant initially chosen for the study, because participants each experienced varying degrees of executive functioning challenges. I used Seidman's (2013) *three-interview series* approach to data collection, as semi-structured interviews completed over time are known to naturally facilitate rapport and trust-building between the researcher and participant and created a context for the information elicited.

Interviews also allowed my participants to tell a story as they reconstructed an *event*, which Bold (2012) has defined as "something that has happened to a person or thing, at a particular time or in a particular situation" (p. 15). Through multiple interviews, participants had more opportunities to reflect upon their responses and express their understanding of the events they choose to share. This rationale supported my choice of data collection method with this specific student population as a means to consider "fitness for purpose" in this phase of the study (Bold, 2012, p. 94).

Interview Protocol. The interview protocol was based on what Seidman (2013) referred to as "in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing" (p. 14). Seidman (2013) proposed this interview method based on four themes that provided the "rationale

and the logic for the structure, technique, and approach to analyzing, interpreting, and sharing interviewing material” (Seidman, 2013, p. 19). The four themes included (a) the Temporal and Transitory Nature of Human Experience, (b) Whose understanding is it? Subjective Understanding, (c) Lived Experience as the Foundation of ‘Phenomena,’ and (d) the Emphasis on Meaning and Meaning in Context (Seidman, 2013, pp. 16-19). These themes are typically carried through a *three-interview series* (Seidman, 2013, p. 20).

In this study, I had originally planned to complete three interviews with each participant, following Seidman’s (2013) interviewing method. Because of challenges encountered in recruiting students for individual interviews, I had to adjust this plan and achieve at least two semi-structured interviews per participant (alone or in a group). Seidman (2013) proposed each interview should last up to 90 minutes, and the series of interviews per participant or group should be conducted over the course of seven days. Each set of interview questions had a specific purpose. During the first interview, I designed questions to set a context for the participant’s experience. Additionally, questions in the first session created opportunities for participants to reflect on meaning in their contexts. Questions designed for second interviews allowed me to explore the details of the participant’s specific experiences. I encouraged participants to reconstruct events they had discussed in less detail during previous meetings. In final interviews, I asked questions designed to encourage participants to reflect on previously established context, events, and the stories they had shared with me. This focus during final sessions allowed time for *meaning-making*; a time when the participant could review information

shared previously and describe the meaning they attributed to their experiences (Seidman, 2013).

Participant Data. In this study, challenges were encountered recruiting students to conduct face-to-face interviews alone. In consulting with the gatekeeper, I learned that students in this program demonstrated a strong preference for group activities over individual activities. This tendency might have been related to the nature of disabilities experienced by many in the program (e.g., ASD involves communication challenges). It also could have been related to the strength of the program's cohort model, in which the development of friendships and benefits of working together to maximize strengths was encouraged. Possibly, students were aware that I worked for the college, and consequently students might have had concerns about the potential for a power imbalance between their role as students and my role as an administrator and researcher. Midway through data collection efforts, I reached out to professors in the program who helped encourage some students to meet with me as a small group. Only one participant completed the three-series interviews, as originally intended. For most participants, the Interviews 1 and 2 were combined into a single interaction. I was focused on exploring the participants' understanding and meaning-making of their experiences with the transitional program and with the grit-enhanced curriculum used in the program.

General attributes of participants are noted below in Table 1. In the interest of protecting participant confidentiality, diagnosis is not included in the attribute coding table. Of the students interviewed, diagnoses experienced included Autism Spectrum Disorder, (ASD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and neurological disorders affecting

executive functioning skills. Many students had been diagnosed with more than one condition (e.g., ASD and Anxiety).

Table 1

Participant Interview Information

Gender	Extent of Exposure of Grit Concepts ^a	Number of Interviews	Location or Method of Interview
M	Fair	3	In Person, at Campus Computer-based virtual meetings
M	Good	2	In Person, at Campus
M	Good	2	In Person, at Campus
F	Good	1	In Person, at Campus
M	Good	1	In Person, at Campus

^aExtent of exposure to grit concepts rating (i.e., Good, Fair, Poor) were based on discussions with the study gatekeeper. Ratings reflect gatekeeper's assessment of each participant's exposure to grit-infused curriculum in classes or with mentors and instructors and of the participant's understanding of the curriculum.

Collective Case Study Protocol. Qualitative case studies, unlike carefully orchestrated experimental lab studies, occur in the real world – in the participant's natural environment – where the researcher needs to remain flexible. A case study protocol is recommended for situations where the researcher's behaviors are affected by the environment. Developing a case study protocol required me to foresee challenges and *coping behaviors* ahead of time in order to maintain rigor and study focus (Yin, 2014). Potential audiences for this case study include community college disability service providers, college leaders, and state policy makers. This case study protocol includes

four sections, including: (a) an overview of the case study intent; (b) data collection procedures; (c) data collection questions, and (d) guidance for writing up the report (Yin, 2014). The case study protocol for the proposed study is integrated throughout Chapter III of this proposal. Specific interview questions are provided in Appendices A, B, and C.

Guide for the case study report. Because the primary intended audience for the case study report focused on *academic colleagues*, the case study report was presented in the form of a dissertation study which emphasizes relationships between the concepts discussed in the review of the literature, participant responses, findings, and the interpretation of those findings (Yin, 2014). Context was a key element in the study. Having a disability in the United States impacts how individuals with disabilities perceive their abilities in many environments, particularly in educational environments. This aspect of context is relevant to questions I asked of participants, to the potential effect grit-enhanced curriculum might have in classroom settings for students with disabilities, and to the meaning participants might make of their educational experiences.

Reflexivity journal. I recognize that my influence on the study was broad. My subjectivity affected design, questions asked, data collected, analysis of data, and how I reported on findings. In this study, my use of the frameworks of grit and CDT were not intended to inhibit the process of gathering information, but rather informed student stories. To allow for my own subjectivity and position, I used journaling to document my thoughts, opinions, and decisions throughout the study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Journal entries were made throughout all stages of research, providing insights on my decisions and reactions to study activities.

Instrumentation: Role of the Researcher

Researchers serve as key instruments through all steps of data collection and interpretation of qualitative data (Bold, 2012; Creswell, 2013). Because individual interviews involve descriptions of experiences told by one person (i.e., participant) and described by another person (i.e., researcher), I was a key instrument in this study. All researchers bring self to the study, and I brought my unique experiences of gender, age, culture, socio-economic status, disability, politics, and other identities to this research. To guide my role in the study, I developed a *case study protocol* prior to beginning the study (Yin, 2014).

Throughout the study, my love of reading and my quest for insight into the interviewing process led me to revisit works by Freire (2013; 2015) and Foucault (1982; 1995). As I prepared for data collection, I took time to reflect upon the nature of an interview and the nature of dialogue between people. Freire (2013) deconstructed the term dialogue and identified its most basic component, the *word* and asserted the following:

But the word is more than an instrument which makes dialogue possible; accordingly, we must seek its constitutive elements. Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world. (p. 87)

Freire (2013) continued on to declare that “human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women

transform the world...To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it” (p. 88). The potential for transformation through dialogue became tangible to me when I read Freire (2013). Consequently, I attempted to truly dialogue with the participants and encourage them to name their experiences. I wanted study participants to have a part in transforming another’s understanding of their experiences as a person with disability, as a student in this specific program, as an individual with a disability learning about grit.

The need for true words was important to me because of the role I had played in helping to establish this program. During the 2014-2015 academic year, I was an administrator responsible for supporting the development and implementation of this new transitional program. I continued to supervise some programmatic work and all fiscal aspects of the program remotely until Fall 2017, when the program transferred completely to the campus administrators. In that administrative role, I met some of the students (e.g., Reese, Hunter, and Cameron) enrolled in the program a few years ago. These students then volunteered to participate in the study. Since the Spring 2017 semester, I did not work in a capacity where I interacted with student participants on a regular basis. I also did not work with them directly or in any manner that would have impacted admissions, assessments, or progression through the program.

As someone involved in the early stages of program development, I remember harboring hopes that the program would ultimately teach self-advocacy to individuals with disabilities. I also hoped that students with disabilities would integrate more smoothly into the culture of the college and that students in the program would learn the skills they needed to successfully achieve their personal, academic, and career goals. When I learned that grit concepts were to be introduced into curriculum at the college, I

thought about how the experience of learning about grit might affect a student with a disability. I wondered if the introduction of grit might serve to offset the deficit model (i.e., medical model) of understanding disabilities which is still so embedded into American institutions of higher education. Throughout the study, I attempted to remain hopeful that this transitional program was valuable to the students who participated. It was important for me to find ways to capture honest interactions and carefully and deeply reflect upon students' words through many lenses other than my own and for the findings to reflect depth through multiple iterations in my analysis and application of frameworks.

Access and rapport. Creswell (2013) emphasized the importance of ensuring access to location and participants and fostering rapport with key stakeholders. As an employee of the college system where the participating community college campus is situated and as someone who assisted in the start-up of the community college transitional program several years ago, my status was not completely detached from the context. I was knowledgeable about the context and known within the study context. Therefore, I was in a role of *participant observer* in this study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014) in conducting this study. I considered this to be the most appropriate approach because of my previously-established rapport with community college leaders and deeper understanding of the setting. Access to study participants and their background data was facilitated by a gatekeeper at the community college campus.

Data Analysis

Becoming familiar with each transcript and identifying remarkable units of data are two ways I prepared for data analysis. Through an iterative coding process, I identified and condensed expressions, or *meaning units*, that reflected the intent of the

study (Saldaña, 2016). Thematic development through coding follows general steps described by Yüksel and Yildirim (2015,) including, “(a) horizontalizing, or a listing of all relevant expressions; (b) synthesizing the texture and structure into an expression; (c) reduction of experiences to the invariant constituents; (d) thematic clustering to create core themes; and (e) comparison of multiple data sources to validate the invariant constituents” (pp. 11-13).

Analytic Memos. Within the researcher’s reflexivity journal, *analytic memos* were documented once the study moved into the data analysis stages. An analytic memo is a written entry which captured my reflections on the coding process, allowing space for me to think critically about the process and findings as the coding work was happening. Saldaña (2016) asserted this reflection enables the researcher to “work *toward* a solution, *away* from a problem or a combination of both” (p. 44).

Individual Case Analysis. Data were collected through three individual interviews with one participant. Due to difficulties in recruiting for individual interviews, the remaining data was collected through group interviews involving another four participants. All interviews resulted in five transcribed interviews. I reviewed each transcript multiple times and coded each one separately. Participant pseudonyms were selected again during the analysis phase to better protect confidentiality. This step was determined to be especially important given the small sample size and the small size of the well-integrated community where the study took place. My primary focus of this study was to explore the collective experiences of participants with executive functioning challenges in participating in a grit-enhanced community college transitional program. Iterative coding procedures were utilized to identify and generate themes. Then, I

examined the data through two primary theoretical perspectives, including the notion of *grit* (Stoltz, 2014) and critical disability theory (Pothier & Devlin, 2006).

Data Analysis and Emerging Themes. Following each interview, digitized audio conversations – with identifying information removed – were shared via a secure online portal for transcription by a neutral, external online company. Transcripts, returned to me in MS Word files, consisted of sentences and phrases organized and time stamped by speaker (e.g., PI, Speaker 1, Speaker 2). For pre-coding purposes, I printed and organized transcripts into a three-ring binder for manual review and mark-up (Saldaña, 2016, p. 20). I reviewed these hard copy transcripts multiple times, prior to first cycle coding set up using word processing and spreadsheet software. I converted the transcribed text into table format in MS Word in order to accurately maintain the same structure of statements by speaker. From table format, I copied and pasted all statements into MS Excel, resulting in 2,324 rows of data in the spreadsheet. I identified the top row as headers and applied the data filter-by-column option. Using this option, the spreadsheet could be arranged and rearranged by column (e.g., speaker). New columns were added as different cycles of coding were completed. When the Project Investigator (PI) statements were removed, a total of 1,425 rows of statements by participants remained. From this set, 281 rows were ultimately identified through first cycle coding as the data corpus used for further analysis. Utilizing MS Excel allowed me to keep data intact by speaker and by conversation, yet also facilitated review of data from multiple perspectives. This method of sorting, arranging, and rearranging the data, referred to as codifying (Saldaña, 2016, p. 9), was used throughout data analysis to facilitate pattern identification and the naming of categories and emerging themes. Data were analyzed

through multiple lenses, including grit (Stoltz, 2014) and Critical Disability Theory. Because of the large number of statements to review and the multiple perspectives considered, *codebooks* were utilized to define and manage emerging code categories in a space kept separate from the data corpus (Saldaña, 2016, p. 27). Separate code lists were described for grit and structural coding analyses. Observations on methodology were also noted. A leading criticism of coding as a research method is the argument that coding is a “reductionist” method with the potential to reduce words and phrases into less meaningful information (Saldaña, 2016, p. 40). My goal of organizing and rearranging the data into smaller units aligns with Saldaña’s (2016) definition of coding as an “analytic act...that assigns rich symbolic meanings through essence-capturing and/or evocative attributes to the data” (p. 40). Through iterative coding cycles and the use of different coding methods, I intended to find patterns and themes representative of the experiences voiced by students with ASD in this grit-enhanced transitional program.

First Cycle Coding. The processes of horizontalizing and synthesizing occurred during first cycle coding. Specifically, first cycle coding involved Attribute Coding, In Vivo Coding, and Structural Coding. The purpose of attribute coding is to highlight descriptors, usually noted at the front of a transcript, which may be of importance to the researcher (Saldaña, 2016, p. 83). Examples of attributes could include variables specific to the participant, such as age, gender, race, and disability. Other variables could be interesting to the researcher, such as the type of data (e.g., transcribed interview), or the date, time, and length of the interview. Attribute coding was an appropriate choice for coding involving multiple participants, because it allowed me to identify common or distinct variables among the participants (Saldaña, 2016). I also hoped to be able to

articulate experiences and the meanings of students' experiences through the voices of each participant. Through iterative reviews of the transcript, I highlighted and then organized participant responses by a focus they had in common. These focus areas were collapsed over time and later emerged as themes. Structural coding is a coding technique which facilitates cataloging of data (Saldaña, 2016). I also used structural coding to identify narratives that related to the specific themes of interest in the study, including grit and critical disability theory. Once themes emerged and structural codes were utilized, I also considered the relevance of the frequency of participant comments within those boundaries.

Second Cycle Coding. Yüksel and Yildirim (2015) described a process of analysis that reduces experiences to discrete elements and clusters them to identify core themes. One objective of second cycle coding involves “reorganizing and reanalyzing data coded through first cycle methods” for the purpose of creating a refined list of comprehensive themes (Saldaña, 2016, p. 234). Reorganizing data was important for me to do because information was received over time and from different sources. I purposely reorganized the data to see it and read from different perspectives. For example, in the initial reviews I read and marked up transcripts as they were completed. Once they were moved into one large database, I could reorganize the data to read it by person. I was able to notice emphasis which was less noticeable during the first review. I was able to clearly see who participated more and who shared less and compare that frequency to the depth of emotion or detail the person shared when speaking.

Axial coding refers to a process where data is “strategically reassembled,” redundant and unnecessary information is removed, and central themes are confirmed

(Saldaña, 2016). Axial coding is an appropriate second cycle analytical process for the proposed study, because it examines both the data and categories identified during first cycle coding. The technique of axial coding also facilitates the achievement of *saturation*; a time in the study where new concepts are no longer emerging (Saldaña, 2016, p. 248). One way that I used axial coding was to filter out all questions made by me. Interviewers may lead the participant unintentionally and reveal more in a question than intended. Through axial coding, I removed my questions and comments from view temporarily and focused on participant statements which were long enough and clear enough to stand completely on their own. By using axial coding and reorganizing the timeline of participant responses, I was able to find evidence of saturation. I was also able to notice emphasis of emotion. I also documented how many times an individual shared the same story or similar types of stories –indicators of how meaningful that story or that storyline was to the person.

Cross-Case Analysis

I compiled data from multiple interviews with each participant by first analyzing each participant individually by applying first and second cycle coding. Relevant categories and themes identified through that analysis were then organized electronically in *word tables* or spreadsheets containing the data from each case on one tab (Yin, 2014). The cross-case data is then assessed and synthesized. In the case analysis, the data is examined and expanded upon to develop potential patterns and themes. During cross-case analysis the focus is on finding similarities and differences across cases; expansion is not the goal of the analysis (Yin, 2014).

First Cycle Coding. Each interview was organized via attribute data, identifying the individuals involved by pseudonym, the location, and the method used for the interview. I used *initial coding*, a method of “breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts” and seeking “similarities and differences” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 115) to review the original transcripts and spreadsheets. On the transcripts, I highlighted, underlined, and wrote initial thoughts next to statements and concepts that resonated with the research question and/or theoretical concepts. Notes and comments were again added once the transcripts were moved into MS Excel. I also identified quotes that were significant for use in the narrative and as representatives of structural and concept code definitions. Initial coding reduced the number of participant statements from 1,425 rows of statements to 281 rows – which comprised the data corpus for the study. *Simultaneous coding* was applied to the primary data set of 281 rows of participant statements, because the “content suggested multiple meanings” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 95). Structural and concept codes were applied to same data (i.e., rows) by adding multiple columns across the spreadsheet. Structural, and concept coding methods were incorporated *sequentially* (Saldaña, 2016, p. 73) during first cycle coding. Each statement was analyzed first in terms of structural categories derived from the nature of the responses to the research question and then with respect to its relevance to the four dimensions of G.R.I.T. (Stoltz, 2014). In this situation, G.R.I.T. is an acronym used by Stoltz (2014) to simultaneously refer to the general concept of grit and Stoltz’s theory of developing grit through focus on growth, resilience, instinct, and tenacity.

Data Analysis Involving Grit Framework. The primary data of 281 rows of data were reviewed with consideration of whether statements represented an aspect of grit

(Stoltz, 2014). This analysis perspective was spurred by one participant who reported minimal exposure to grit through the transitional program's curriculum, but who commented on how he now understood grit as something he has had to have "to succeed in what I wanted to do." I realized participants might be able to demonstrate grit, even if they did not overtly discuss the grit concepts they had learned through the curriculum. The 281 rows of the data corpus were compared against four dimensions of grit described by Stoltz (2014). These dimensions included (a) "Growth: your propensity to seek and consider new ideas, additional alternatives, different approaches, and fresh perspectives; (b) Resilience: your capacity to respond constructively and ideally make good use of all kinds of adversity; (c) Instinct: your gut-level capacity to pursue the right goals in the best and smartest ways; and (d) Tenacity: the degree to which you persist, commit to, stick with, and relentlessly go after whatever you choose to achieve" (Stoltz, 2014, p. 20). Transcripts were assessed with this terminology in mind, seeking instances where the participant revealed aspects of grit even when not overtly discussing grit. Each statement that appeared to demonstrate an aspect of grit was identified as such in an additional column of the Excel database.

Data Analysis involving Critical Disability Theory. Where methods of coding were useful in detecting sameness and patterns, another process was needed to explore unique statements that noticeably stood out in the data analysis phase. Therefore, a final level of analysis was conducted after the analyses of emerging themes and grit analysis were completed. Throughout the process of reviewing transcripts and iterative coding, I noted an element of tension between the individual's experience as a person with a disability and their academic experiences and career hopes. These statements did not

create a consistent pattern and did not appear to fit within the emerging or grit concepts, yet the statements themselves warranted further exploration. If coding is a method that “situates the researcher at a distance from the theory,” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013, p. 266) another analysis was required to bring data, Critical Disability Theory, and researcher experience closer together. The practice of *thinking with theory* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) brings multiple fields (e.g., reality, representation, subjectivity) together and allows the researcher to “use theory to think with data (or use data to think with theory)” interchangeably (p. 261). The maneuver of working the same dataset repeatedly was utilized in this analysis. Jackson and Mazzei (2013) described this maneuver as “working with the same ‘data chunks’ repeatedly to ‘deform [them], to make [them] groan and protest’ [Foucault, 1980, p. 22-23] with an overabundance of meaning, which in turn not only creates new knowledge but also shows the suppleness of each when plugged in” (p. 265). By *thinking with theory* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013), researchers further explore the complexities of the individual experience and counterbalance simplifications in understanding individual experiences which could occur through data reduction into categories and themes. Critical theory “insists on revealing power dynamics” (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009, p. 59). Critical Disability Theory (CDT) is built on critical theory and emphasizes how important both the condition of the disability and the environment are to each other (Evans, Broido, Brown, & Wilke, 2017). Therefore, the context of this study is relevant and was reviewed in light of analyzing data through a critical disability theory lens. Within this context, the 281 rows of the data corpus were read again through the lens of the researcher’s understanding of critical disability theory – including the researcher’s understanding of how power dynamics and personal beliefs about ability

influence a person's responses during an interview. To record observations during this analysis, an additional column was added to the study database (i.e., Excel spreadsheet). Statements about relationships between disability, personal goals, and external structural factors were identified with the word *tension*. Tension was defined in the codebook (Saldaña, 2016) as statements that combine an understanding of individual power with acknowledgement of structural factors.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Guba and Lincoln (1982) asserted the achievement of four dimensions of trustworthiness were necessary to establish the worth of a study. These dimensions included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Credibility refers to actions producing confidence in the truth of the research. In the proposed study, credibility is addressed through the researcher's *prolonged engagement* in the field (Creswell, 2013), as evidenced by use of the participant-observation method of observation (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014) and Seidman's (2013) three-series interview method.

Although qualitative case studies are not designed to be generalizable to the greater population, in this study I utilized identified theoretical frameworks to facilitate *analytic generalization*, or the expansion and generalization of theories (Yin, 2014, p. 21). Transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) is also assured through the use of *rich, thick description* (Creswell, 2013) derived from multiple interviews with each participant. Dependability in a study indicates that the findings are consistent and reliable (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Adherence to a case study protocol, with a detailed description of the

study design and implementation to mitigate bias and errors, was utilized to promote reliable replication of interviews (Yin, 2014).

Confirmability occurs using strategies that prioritize the participant's voice in the findings and minimize researcher "bias, motivation, or interest" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). To support confirmability, researcher positionality was documented to clarify researcher bias (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). I maintained a reflexive journal (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) and created analytic memos throughout the data analysis stage of work (Saldaña, 2016). Additionally, successive cycles of coding were utilized to create an iterative process of explanation building (Saldaña, 2016).

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was limited by the number and uniqueness of individuals participating. Individuals participating in this study were selected based on their enrollment at a large, suburban community college, their participation in a specific transitional continuing education program with a grit-enhanced curriculum, and their diagnosis of a condition affecting executive functioning skills. Student participation was also voluntary. Findings of this study are not intended be generalizable to other students or other community colleges.

The study also was delimited by several assumptions. It was assumed that the students participating in the study would become comfortable enough over multiple meetings to share personal information. Unfortunately, only three of the five participants engaged in multiple interviews, therefore resulting in an unexpected limitation to the study. I also assumed information shared by participants would be accurate and honestly interpreted. Another assumption was that my efforts to protect student identity would be

successful, without affecting the quality or quantity of data shared. I also expected that students would participate fully throughout the study, until its completion.

Summary

This chapter outlined methodology for this qualitative collective case study. Criterion sampling was employed for participant selection. Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews with participants and participant data was stored in a secure, online database. Researcher reflections and analytical memos were also maintained in a separate, secure, online system. First and second cycle coding techniques were employed to analyze data and produce central themes. Cross-case analysis was conducted to examine similarities and differences between cases and dominant themes across cases. Case study protocol, researcher reflexive journaling, analytical memos, and maintenance of a chain of evidence were employed to ensure trustworthiness. Findings from both individual and cross-case analysis are discussed in Chapter IV, as informed by grit and critical disability theory.

CHAPTER IV

Results

Methods used in conducting this collective case study were outlined in Chapter III. The manner in which five study participants were selected, how data was collected, the role of the researcher, and strategies for data analysis were all discussed in detail. Thematic analysis, as well as content analysis, served as the overarching analytical approaches I used to interpret data. Additionally, I interpreted the data through two different theoretical perspectives, Grit Theory (Duckworth, 2016; Stoltz, 2014) and Critical Disability Theory (Evans, Broido, Brown, & Wilke, 2017; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017; Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Also, I described how I leveraged trustworthiness in my research process and described limitations and delimitations of the study.

In this chapter, results of data collection and analysis are described and illustrated with example quotes from individual participant and focus group interviews. First, I describe results from the thematic and content analyses. In my interpretation of the data, using first and second cycle coding procedures, I identified four emergent themes that seemed to best represent how the student participants described their experiences with the grit-enhanced community college transitional program. These four areas of focus or emergent themes included: (a) Program-Focused, (b) Interpersonally Aware, (c) Self-Focused; and (d) Future-Oriented.

Following discussion of findings by theme, I describe my interpretation of the data through a Grit Theory lens (see Duckworth, 2016; Stoltz, 2014), and a Critical Disability Theory framework (see Evans, Broido, Brown, & Wilke, 2017; Meekosha &

Shuttleworth, 2017; Pothier & Devlin, 2006). Results of the analysis through a grit lens indicated that the concept of grit seemed to be appealing to all participants. Participants generally described grit as a positive framework through which they could understand and articulate their experiences as both individuals with a disability and as college students with disabilities. However, attempts at deeper discussions with participants revealed that most participants had less exposure to grit concepts and activities than expected. Findings about exposure to grit are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

In the final presentations of results in this chapter, I discuss my interpretation of findings through the critical disability theory framework. Examining the data through a critical disability theory (Evans, Broido, Brown, & Wilke, 2017; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017; Pothier & Devlin, 2006) revealed tension around balancing an awareness of individual limitations related to disability and setting personal, academic, and career goals. This type of tension referred to the individual's understanding of who they are and who they wish to be.

Most participants described their decision to participate in the program as a way to increase their abilities to live as independently as possible and to become more self-reliant. Participants also emphasized how dependent they had been on parents, friends, classmates, faculty, and other college employees for their successful experiences to date. This reliance on others for goal attainment represented another area of tension. In this later section of this chapter, I also discuss observations of how the medical model and functional limitations models of disability remained ever-present throughout aspects of the study.

Findings Related to Individual Interview Approach

Data included in this study comes from five study participants who participated in one or more sessions of semi-structured interviews. In writing the initial protocol for this study, I planned to utilize Seidman's (2013) interview process for individual interviews with participants. I made multiple recruitment efforts by engaging a gatekeeper, who worked in the college's transitional program. Additionally, I informed instructors in the transitional community college program about my desire to recruit students who had disclosed diagnoses of autism or who had been identified as having executive functioning challenges.

Despite my efforts, I was not fully successful in recruiting the targeted number of students to interview who met the study criteria. Therefore, some interview sessions were conducted as individual meetings while others took place in groups. Although I had hoped to gather more in-depth information on the experiences of the participants in the study, I was unable to capture in-depth stories in the individual interviews and found focus groups interviews a bit more effective in obtaining insights on students' experiences with the college grit-enhanced transition program. Perhaps, students' executive functioning skills limited their abilities to fully express themselves in a one-on-one setting, but this assumption would require further examination in future studies. Nevertheless, in all interviews, I still utilized the originally proposed interview questions from the interview protocol (see Appendix A, B, and C), which were based on Seidman's (2013) focus on eliciting subjective understandings of participants with the "emphasis on meaning and meaning in context" (Seidman, 2013, pp. 16-19). The student participants were asked to select pseudonyms for use in the study; however, pseudonyms chosen by

participants were changed, favoring gender neutral names to protect the identity of the one woman participant.

A focus of case study research is to look at “a whole unit...as it exists in its real-life context” (Johnson & Christenson, 2014, p. 51). Each participant’s viewpoint represented a part of a larger unit, that is, the collective experience of being a student with a disability in this transitional, grit-enhanced college program. The findings represent a more holistic perspective of the experiences of Oliver, Hunter, Cameron, Reese, and Leo (pseudonyms) with the grit-enhanced college transitional program. Therefore, it seemed to be most meaningful to discuss my interpretations in terms of the four emergent themes across the student’s participants (cases).

Table 2

Individual Experiences with Emergent Themes

	Program-Focused	Interpersonally Aware	Self-Focused	Future-Oriented
Oliver	X	XX	X	X
Hunter	X	X	XX	-
Cameron	X	X	X	X
Reese	XX	-	X	XX
Leo	X	X	X	X

Note. This table illustrates the strength of each individual’s discussion of experiences related to that emergent themes (i.e., X). For each theme, participants whose responses reflected stronger references to a particular theme are noted with two marks (i.e., XX). In two instances, a hyphen indicates the participant did not make references related to that particular theme.

As described in the data analysis section in Chapter III, transcripts of participant interviews were reviewed multiple times, then transferred into word processing and spreadsheet software for first and second cycle coding. Once my statements as the project investigator (PI) statements were removed, a total of 1,425 rows of statements by participants remained. From that data set, 281 rows were ultimately identified through first cycle coding as the data corpus used for further analysis. Through thematic analysis and content analysis of interpreted codes– using initial and structural codes – I organized emerging patterns into four themes. These emergent themes are represented as follows and are noted here in order of emphasis according to findings: (a) Program-focused, (b) Interpersonally Aware (c) Self-focused, and (d) Future-oriented.

Program-Focused

I included codes under a Program-focused theme to represent when participants talked about the program itself. These discussions included references to program-related content, tools, and processes including (e.g., applications, admissions processes, courses, curriculum). Additionally, when participants spoke about their own program-related experiences and their thoughts about staff and faculty, I coded those experiences under the Program-Focused theme, as well. The majority of participants talked most frequently about experiences in the program as the focus of their informal interviews with me. This may be a reflection of the questions asked, and it may be an indicator of how important the meaning of context is in understanding the individual's experiences (Seidman, 2013). The focus on program corresponded to focused interview questions such as:

1. What meaning does this program have for you?

2. What has helped you move forward in the program (e.g., family, teachers, friends, skills learned, goals achieved)?

Several participants indicated the program itself had a significant influence on their lives. One component of this program was to educate students about their abilities and provide opportunities to explore how their disability affected their lives. For example, students participated in surveys to explore grit, career interests, and to assess other academic skills (e.g., Math assessments). Additionally, students in the transitional college program frequently are asked to take time for self-reflection and are through guided group reflection facilitated by instructors. Embedded in Program-focused findings were subthemes of how the students believed participation in the program helped them identify their strengths, feel respected, develop independence and a sense of advocacy, and experience a sense of being a “normal” student. Participants shared that their experiences in the community college transitional program had helped them identify and recognize their strengths Cameron expressed, "I like [this] program because it helps me realize more about myself and what I can do, and what my strengths and weaknesses are." The experience of feeling respected also became apparent among the students interviewed, as exemplified by the following: “I see more respect here and they...don't really look at the need of the person; they just see someone that is trying...and they can come to...helping them in the way they need help," and "I like the respect and feel like, you know...that you're really paying for something that you know you'll get."

Developing a sense of independence and the confidence to advocate for oneself was also experienced by some of the participants as a result of their program participation. Hunter expressed: “I...had to go and...find a place where I can manage my

own independence...and I think this program, and other programs, but especially this program, has helped me accomplish that.” Leo exhibited similar sentiments related to confidence and advocacy, “I would say this program helps you stand up for yourself and, like for example, if you have a problem you can ask for accommodations from a professor...” Reese also conveyed a sense of agency, “It’s going to help me in the long run...to learn more things...I’m looking for more options...” Cameron talked about how the program actually helped him better attune to social cues, which in turn develops executive functioning abilities, a primary focus of the grit-enhanced college transition program: “...there [were] a couple things that helped me, like human relations [where you learn]...body language and how to work with other people and learn different situations that, that you can do and cannot do.”

All student participants also described how their involvement in the program provided them with a place where they experienced a sense of being “normal,” rather than disabled. This sense of “normality” was exemplified by Oliver, “Well, they talk to me, like I’m a normal guy.” This notion of normativity and feeling of “otherness” have greater implications in college settings when analyzed through a Critical Disability lens, which I will discuss in Chapter V.

The clarity and descriptiveness of students’ Program-focused discussions, when compared to their descriptions of non-program related experiences, indicated participants were very interested in discussing the program, despite my efforts to elicit more in-depth insights related to participants’ overall college experiences as students with executive functioning challenges. Throughout the interviews, I asked participants questions that allowed for opportunities to expand on personal strengths, areas for growth, personal

struggles, hopes and dreams. Yet, despite these probing efforts, overall each participant still appeared to be most interested, and perhaps most comfortable, discussing the community college transitional program and how their experiences within the program influenced their lives. The majority of statements about the program were positive, even when offered opportunities to describe challenges and areas for improvement. For example, when I asked about staffing, participants immediately began naming instructors and praising staff. When I asked for areas of the improvement, they suggested hiring more staff who were equally as good the current team.

For several participants, this program was the first educational experience they had where they were invited to speak openly about having a disability. Some participants shared how this program was the first time they realized that faculty and administrators were aware of their disabilities, yet still demonstrated concern and respect for them. Overwhelmingly, all participants described the program positively and articulated how the program helped them further development of academic and social skills, as well as academic and career plans.

Interpersonally Aware

I interpreted students' references to their interpersonal interactions as a key idea particularly for students with executive functioning challenges and categorized these experiences under the theme title, Interpersonally Aware. In my content analysis of codes, the theme of Interpersonally Aware represented the second strongest area of focus for participants, indicating the high level of importance this theme played in their experiences with the community college transitional program. This theme included discussions where the participant described supportive people and events, positive and

challenging interactions between themselves and others, or awareness of difficulties between individuals with a disability and those without a disability. The focus on interpersonal awareness corresponded to some of the focused interview questions such as:

1. What do you think another student from your program might say if asked ‘what is it like to be a college student and have a disability?’
2. What information do you think new college students who also have a disability should know about being a college student with a disability?

The following quotes exemplify the theme of Interpersonally Aware. Cameron noted,

“...I think they were impressed of what autistic people can do.” Leo stated, “Because I know I need help, you know? We have, definitely, a lot of growth that we have come about...But we need to lean on each other sometimes.” Reese suggested, “Their view on us needs to change or we won't get any change,” and also shared this statement: “I'm a pretty social guy and I get along with pretty much everyone. But there's like a select few that we just never meshed, and it's just kinda stayed that way...I had to learn just to let things go and not let it bother me.” Another student, Oliver agreed: “Yeah, I need to get better at interaction with other people.”

One participant shared an experience of joining in a student life club at the college, along with another student from the community college transitional program. Below, Reese described how they were received by others in the club and the opportunity it gave all of the students to learn about each other:

“...it came up a few times [at a college student life club] how...like, one of the people who I know who was in [this program]...they [the other club

members]...did notice a lot and...just to bring up the question is actually good, you know?...just the question itself is like...it is okay...that opens up a door for them to have more questions... It sparked a conversation. Yes, there is something different but how can I help or assist this person? Or how can I go about it? Or how can I be of a positive light or help because that's what the club is about...being a light to others.”

Students were interested in giving advice to a fictional new student with a disability attending a community college. When asked as a focus group what advice they would share with such a student, some responses included: “Be open and honest. Know your rights as a student, or a student with disabilities, either way. And, um, be open to sharing;” and, “I'd say don't be afraid to ask questions... 'Cause if you don't ask questions they can't very much help you.” The notion of self-advocacy also was apparent within this theme of interpersonal awareness. As Leo exemplified: “I would say this program helps you stand up for yourself...for example, if you have a problem you can ask for accommodations from a professor...or if there's something that you believe is wrong you can walk up to someone...and basically speak your mind. Let them know.”

The community college transitional program includes at least one history course on understanding disability models in the United States. Through that course, students learned about the social justice model of understanding disabilities and the medical model of understanding disabilities, among other topics. Throughout the community college transitional program, students were encouraged to think critically, understand their rights, and let others know their needs (e.g., self-advocacy). Still another course focuses on human relationships and how to improving understanding of people through knowing

more about tone of voice, body language, and through role playing. Participants were not polled on whether or not they had taken these courses, but several students directly referred to these two courses by name or by content.

Self-Focused

During my interpretation of data, the notion of self (i.e., Self-focused) emerged as a theme, based on participant's descriptions of themselves and their own abilities and challenges. Where participants described their social skills, academic skills, general strengths and areas for growth, I categorized these experiences Self-focused. The theme of Self-focused appears to have unintentionally corresponded to some of the focused interview questions, such as:

1. What does the word disability mean to you?
2. What social skills are your strengths?
3. What social skills are you working to improve?
4. What academic skills are your strengths?
5. What academic skills are you working to improve?

Examples of quotes exemplifying a Self-focused theme include these statements made by each participant during a group session. Hunter reported "... My challenge mostly is time management." Cameron placed a positive focus on his area for growth by stating, "I'm not too good on...technology. So, a lot of things were on computer and I need to turn in things...but I adapted and I learned a lot from that. That was really challenging." Other participants shared these statements when asked to describe their strengths and areas for growth: "Well, one that I'm good at is communicating effectively. I'm good at open-mindedness, like I could adapt to ideas. I'm flexible. Well, one that...I've struggled with

the most and I've improved on is advocating. My best would probably be open-mindedness and professionalism.” Reese was proud of his work in gaining admission into the program, he reported: “I got myself started...because, if I didn't, I was going to be this far. This place I couldn't have known that first year.”

Another element within the Self-focused theme relates back to participants' internal challenges and experiences as students who have executive functioning challenges related to memory and coping. Various quotes offered insights into participants' perceptions of their disabilities and how it affected their lives. Oliver expressed, "I have autism...I know my greatest strength is long-term memory and my weakness is short-term memory.” Hunter talked about struggles with forgetfulness, “...sometimes even though I may look okay on the outside I definitely can be forgetful sometimes. Then I start forgetting things sometimes.” Cameron contemplated, “...a disability - what that means to me is that I just have a few more challenges that I need to work through and, um, find a way to cope with...what I have.”

Participants sharing Self-focused experiences appeared to be most interested in sharing their experiences about the program and about their own academic and career-planning journeys. These results may be related to the type of questions asked. They may also be related to the student's experiences through the program in learning how to self-reflect. Additionally, the theme of Self-focused still relates to how these students positioned and defined themselves in the world as “others” who were somehow different or “not normal” when compared to notions of societal normativity which students can experience as particularly oppressive in college settings.

Future-Oriented

I categorized references to future academic aspirations or career hopes or plans as the theme, Future-oriented. This category contained student participants' discussions of internships, career and academic plans, or general hopes and dreams for the future were coded and collapsed. This focus on the future may have corresponded to focused interview questions such as:

1. What future ideas do you have about college / college classes?
2. What are your hopes and dreams after this program?

The following are some examples of Future-oriented theme quotes. Leo replied, "I'm glad I'm on the path I am. I've seen a lot and I have yet to see more...the end state goal is to get back to credit classes." Reese shared that he will be "...hopefully taking the academic route...and then probably after that, going to work." Hunter has hopes for employment, saying "I hope that I would work a job that I'm happy with." Cameron stated, "I like to work with other kids to teach them." Oliver wanted to "be engaged in community." Hunter added, "...and hopefully, the end state goal is to get back to credit classes...I'm going to get my associates in something (laughs)... no, I don't know yet...then probably go out and get work."

Compared to other themes, the lowest number of codes from interview transcripts related to participant references to their future. Fewer student discussions of their future aspirations might have been related to the way I asked the interview questions and how group dynamics influenced participant responses. For some interview questions, all participants were actively contributing. For questions related to the future, fewer participants responded or appeared not to have considered future plans. Planning for the

future is considered an executive function so participants might not have practiced reflecting on future projections.

Summary Related to Thematic Analysis

Although much of the analysis focused on participants' described experiences, I believe that my role as the researcher/interviewer naturally influenced participant responses. In some cases, I realized that my coding process was somewhat reductive in that the context was lost. Interpreting an entire conversation provided a richer description. For example, in the conversation below, I explored the meaning of the word *disability* with two of the participants:

PI: "...in [your community college transitional program] you have to talk about having a disability. So...my question is: What does the word disability mean to you? What does that mean to each person?"

Response 1: "Well, in a class that I'm taking right now [in the program...we are] dealing with the history of disabilities...I would just define it as a person that has mental or physical limits...to doing a daily task."

PI: "That's good. What do y'all think of that definition? You wanna add to it?"

Response 2: "...sometimes, even though I may look okay on the outside I definitely can be forgetful sometimes. Then I start forgetting things sometimes...like I get worked up, or just like in the process of that...I find my [diagnosis] gets to me and [I] forget more things and I get worked up about more things...like a disability- what that means to me is that I just have a few more challenges that I need to work through and...find a way to cope with the things I got, [with] what I have."

One of the participants explained how students explored definitions of disability in classwork in the community college transitional program. The other participant described what disability meant on a more personal level. The casual tone of the informal interview conversation illustrates the general comfort level the participants displayed in discussing how they experience having a disability. However, this conversation also illustrates how both participants refer to disability in a manner consistent with the medical model and/or the functional limitations framework. Both models of understanding disabilities are deeply ingrained in American society – another aspect of participant data described in more detail later in this chapter, in the section on Critical Disability theory findings.

Table 3

Themes, Definitions, Quotes, Instances, and Number of Quotes

Themes	Definition	Representative Quote	# of Codes
Program-focused	References to the program experience.	"... my school experience has definitely had its ups and downs, but I think I'm definitely headed in the right direction...with this program..."	99
Interpersonally Aware	References to interpersonal interactions with others.	"I'm a pretty social guy and I get along with pretty much everyone. But there's...a select few that we just never meshed, and it's just kind of stayed that way..."	73
Self-focused	References to self, personal abilities and challenges.	"One that I'm good at is communicating effectively."	68
Future-oriented	References to future academic or career hopes or plans.	"It's not always going to be about a grade, it's going to be about how well you put it together."	20

Interpretation of Findings through a Grit Framework.

Direct participant references to grit were limited. Of the five participants interviewed during this study, only two students spoke at length about the grit-enhanced aspect of the curriculum. Focused interview questions aimed at learning about the participant's grit-related experiences in the program included:

1. What can you tell me about GRIT?
2. Can you give me an example of a time you noticed GRIT in your life or your actions?

Through discussions with the gatekeeper, I learned that some participants had experienced less exposure to the grit-enhanced curriculum concepts than expected. Still others had trouble recalling the exact nature of the activities and projects involving grit, possibly due to challenges associated with their disabilities. The experience noted in these interactions, along with other conversations about grit with the participants, inspired the analysis seeking patterns consistent with aspects of grit, as defined by Stoltz (2014). Therefore, I took the step of reviewing all data intentionally looking for references to the grit dimensions described by Stoltz (2014).

I relied on Stoltz's (2014) definitions for growth, resilience, instinct, and tenacity as I considered descriptions of participant experiences. Growth has been defined as "your propensity to seek and consider new ideas, additional alternatives, different approaches, and fresh perspectives" (Stoltz, 2014, p. 20). Resilience refers to the "capacity to respond constructively and ideally make good use of all kinds of adversity" (Stoltz, 2014, p. 20). Instinct was defined as the "gut-level capacity to pursue the right goals in the best and smartest ways," and tenacity referred to "the degree to which you persist, commit to, stick with, and relentlessly go after whatever you choose to achieve" (Stoltz, 2014, p. 20).

Following the analysis of data through a grit framework, I found that 102 (out of 281) participant descriptions of experiences at the college contained aspects of grit, with the majority focusing on the *growth* component of grit. Some participants indicated a familiarity with grit concepts, without the ability to connect them directly to grit as a framework. For example, one participant responded when asked about grit, "I've never heard of it...[but] once you say about strengths and weakness..." As the interviewer, I

probed further stating: “Mm-hmm....Sounds familiar?” The student then responded by saying, “Yeah...it reminds me of list[ing] things by [what I] can and cannot do, but I can turn my greatest...greatest weaknesses into my strengths.”

The student could not recall the details of how to turn weaknesses into strengths. However, through our discussions I learned there was a positivity to believing in the ability to turn weaknesses into strengths, suggestive of what Dweck (2013) and Stoltz (2014) had referred to when describing a growth mindset. Without directly speaking about grit, this study participant had demonstrated grit components while sharing about program experiences.

Two other participants spoke with general positivity about grit; indicating they liked it, without adding specifics. Two participants had clear memories of learning about grit in the classroom. They also connected this learning to their own beliefs about how understanding the grit may or may not benefit individuals with disabilities. The statements below demonstrate this connection:

PI: “...what do you think it's like for students who have disabilities to learn about grit?”

Response 1: “Well, [as] a person who has a disability, I feel that for me...grit is...it's definitely more of an importance. It's an importance for everyone, but definitely more so for us because we constantly wouldn't do things, you know? We try to overcome our differences and work with them...if we can overcome some things that happened, we work with them, you know?”

Response 2: “I think...I've always had this disability...So, to learn about this sort of described my entire life; how I've always tried hard and stuff. I really was happy and accepting in learning this.”

Other students struggled more with the concept of grit. For example, one student remarked: “...it seemed they just toss it [grit] at us. I mean, they explained it, but it wasn't in depth so...we just learned that grit stamped...[what the letters stand for]...it could be more integrated.” Another student stated: “...I know though what it stands for. But it's just sort of like...I just don't. Like we talk about it, but what is it really doing?” This student's comment demonstrates the importance of determining whether students understand the theoretical notion of grit or if it is most important to use a grit framework to assist students with the development of college coping skills.

Participant descriptions of experiences at the community college touched on some of the grit dimensions including: growth, resilience, instinct, and tenacity. Few participants spoke directly about grit experiences. Not all participants shared descriptive information about their experiences with a grit-enhanced curriculum. Data observations through this grit perspective are noted in Table 4, below.

Table 4

Data Observations – Grit Conceptual Framework (Stoltz, 2014)

Grit Term	Grit Definition	Representative Quote	# of Related Codes
Growth	Your propensity to seek and consider new ideas, additional alternatives, different approaches, and fresh perspectives	...it was tough getting around the campus, but, but sometimes, I need to learn to check my emails on that campus if I go, to [see]...if my class was canceled or not.	33

Grit Term	Grit Definition	Representative Quote	# of Related Codes
Resilience	Your capacity to respond constructively and ideally make good use of all kinds of adversity.	So, it's just, it sort of seemed, like for me, it just seemed all out of reach and a little bit unrealistic...to go to get a doctorates [degree] where...you know, that would be a lot of...workload on me...and it's changing...just sort of to a more realistic path versus the dreamer's path.	26
Tenacity	The degree to which you persist, commit to, stick with, and relentlessly go after whatever you choose to achieve.	I've had to deal with GRIT my entire life because of my disability, so I've had to use GRIT to succeed in what I wanted to do. Especially, I've had to use tenacity and resilience.	24
Instinct	Your gut-level capacity to pursue the right goals in the best and smartest ways.	I'm going to get my associates in something (laughs)...don't know...no, I don't know yet...	19

Note: N = 102 statements out of 281 statements made by participants.

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) Framework Interpretation

Three tenants of Critical Disability Theory (CDT) surfaced frequently in journaling throughout transcript reviews and other analyses. These tenants included (a) an understanding of the importance of environment to the individual with a disability and the challenges individuals with a disability may face in achieving independence and inclusion in society (Evans,, Broido, Brown,, & Wilke, 2017; Foucault, 1982; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017; Pezdek & Rasinski, 2017); (b) an understanding that the researcher should be reflective and observant of both historical and current contexts (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017); and (c) an awareness of the dynamics of power and an

awareness that these dynamics contribute to, reinforce, and influence emerging social constructs (Foucault, 1982; Pezdek & Rasinski, 2017).

As noted earlier, the community college transitional program curriculum includes courses designed to teach students about models of disability (e.g., medical model, social justice model). Specific program activities are designed to expose students to role playing and group reflection, as methods of understanding difficult situations and encouraging self-advocacy. However, ableism is still dominant in the United States. The medical model and other models of describing people's abilities through categorized functional limitations and deficits are still dominant in our society. Despite targeted disability awareness activities and advocacy training by the community college transitional program, all students described their disabilities through a medical model lens. Several participants also expressed their experiences (e.g., seeking education, career planning) while simultaneously comparing that experience to their perception of how they believe their peers without disabilities go through similar experiences. Essentially, several participants described their position as a decision-maker as being a less powerful position; a decision-making position where they had fewer options, where they had to remain keenly aware of their abilities when others did not have to, and one where they have to rely on key people to get their needs met. Participants also expressed an awareness of me, as the Project Investigator, as a person with power and a person without a disability.

Therefore, the intersection between power dynamics and challenges associated with certain disabilities may have created an unexpected outcome; perhaps only highly confident students with strong communication skills volunteered. The result of these

power dynamics was a limited number of participants and the need to form groups of students comfortable talking together in interview sessions. The group talk technique was recommended by the gatekeeper who knew from her own program experience that the students tended to speak up more in the program classes when allowed to work in groups, implying that in classes where there is an instructor (i.e., another powerful person) students gather together to have power, to be able to express themselves.

Most of the study participants also described a sense of *differentness* in power and autonomy from other non-disabled individuals. During interviews, some participants shared experiences in ways that highlighted their perception of power differences related to having disability. For example, when one participant answered a question I asked about their understanding of their disability, the participant pointed out first that I do not present as a person with a disability. Then the participant continued on with their response. The act of starting with a comparison – of identifying something perceived of as “normal” and then pointing to Self – demonstrated an awareness of differentness participants seem to carry with them at all times. This awareness, or *differentness*, extended into many areas of life and was noticeable in discussions about areas of independent living (e.g., living in dorms versus living at home, the ability to drive a car) and areas involving decision-making (e.g., academic goals, career exploration). I identified these experiences of differentness as *tension*. I described *tension* as arising when participants expressed an understanding of individual power and its interplay with structural factors contributing to the marginalization of individuals with disabilities today, including students with disabilities on college campuses. For example, one participant responded this way to a question about the meaning of the word disability:

PI: “When I say the word disability, what does that mean to you?”

Response: “It means that you...like you [the PI] don't have [a disability]...like ...for me, for instance... I don't know what to do...I have to be told what to do.”

Other quotes, also indicated tension and a sense of differentness from peers without disabilities who are faced with academic and career decisions. Leo shared, “I'm glad that I'm sort of becoming more realistic...that [option] might not be my dream job...but it would be what's reasonable for my skills...My situation is more about my skillset and my ability versus...maybe someone else...[who changes their focus because] it's boring.”

Oliver shared, “I don't like driving, I just need to learn how to drive myself without depending on people to take me somewhere.” Cameron remembered, “I started at a different [campus at same college] that doesn't have this program...and after the first year, I believe...that campus didn't help me.” Reese explained, “Well, for a job, my original goal was to be a [names career option], but I'd have to have a doctorate and teach a class. So, it's just, it sort of seemed, like for me, it just seemed all out of reach and a little bit unrealistic...to go to get a doctorates [degree] where...you know, that would be a lot of...workload on me...and it's changing...just sort of to a more realistic path versus the dreamer's path.”

Summary

This chapter presented findings regarding the collective experience of being a student with a disability affecting executive functioning enrolled in a grit-enhanced community college transitional program. The results from thematic analysis and content analysis were presented through four emergent themes which best represented how participants described their experiences. These emergent themes, organized in order of

importance to the participants, were: (a) Program-focused, (b) Interpersonally Aware (c) Self-focused, and (d) Future-oriented. Findings as interpreted through a grit framework (Duckworth, 2016; Stoltz, 2014) and through Critical Disability theory (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017; Pothier & Devlin, 2006) were also presented in this chapter. All results were further described and illustrated through participant quotes and excerpts from individual and group semi-structured interviews.

Chapter V presents the implications of the findings and recommendations to conclude this study. The implications of study findings are described as they relate to community colleges choosing to integrate grit into transitional programs for students with disabilities. Program implications considering the intersectionality of Critical Disability theory and grit are also raised. Finally, I complete Chapter V by sharing proposed recommendations for two specific audiences, community college leaders and future researchers.

CHAPTER V

Summary and Recommendations

In this chapter, I conclude my study in which I explored the experiences of students with disabilities in a grit-enhanced, community college transitional program. In Chapter V, I discuss implications of my research findings and make recommendations for practice and future research.

In Chapter I, I proposed that current national conversations about student success in U.S. community colleges lack the perspective of how to serve students with disabilities in a positive, intentional way. In Chapter II, I reviewed existing literature on the topic. Marginalization of disability issues in the national discourse on student success leaves college leaders without the understanding or tools required to support students with disabilities - especially those students with disabilities affecting executive functioning skills. This marginalizing also is occurring at a time when the U.S. economy is shifting and demanding more highly skilled labor; a time when technological advances are expanding rapidly enough to replace lower-skilled jobs involving repetition and routine work (e.g., toll booth collection, retail check-out positions). The loss of jobs through increased use of technology creates more competition for remaining positions at that same skill level. Now more than ever, individuals with disabilities must complete a college degree or certificate to achieve economic independence. In a society that still values ability over disability, employment enables individuals with disabilities to establish themselves as contributing members of an ablest society.

With this understanding of current societal issues, I intended to explore the experiences of students with disabilities who shared the phenomenon of attending a

community college transitional program at a select college in the Southern United States. This transitional program was originally designed to intentionally support the needs of students with executive functioning challenges. A unique aspect of the program was that it incorporated grit-infused strategies and activities in its curriculum with the purposes of promoting college student persistence and retention and providing students with strategies for understanding and overcoming adversity. I conducted individual and group interviews with study participants, then analyzed and interpreted data using thematic and content analysis approaches. I also applied the theoretical frameworks of Grit and Critical Disability theory to inform my interpretations.

As noted in Chapter III, phases of data collection were based on Creswell's (2013) data collection circle and included (a) identification of the site; (b) access and rapport-building with key stakeholders; (c) purposeful, criterion sampling; (d) data collection; (e) recording information; (f) addressing issues occurring in the field; (g) resolving any field concerns; and (h) the storing of data. I encountered challenges during the recruiting stage which affected data collection. My plan to conduct semi-structured individual interviews following Seidman's (2013) three-series interview approach had to be adjusted after I was only able to successfully complete the series with only one participant. Based on suggestions by the gatekeeper, I opened up two sessions for group meetings and gathered data from the other participants through those meetings. All transcripts gathered were recorded and stored for the data analysis phase. I interpreted and categorized student participants' experiences with a grit-enhanced community college transitional program into four primary emergent themes: (a) Program-focused (b) Interpersonally Aware; (c) Self-focused; and (d) Future-oriented.

Throughout my research, I maintained a reflexivity journal, which provided valuable insights in preparing to write Chapter V. Journal reflections prompted me to anticipate potential implications and recommendations for community college leaders, as well as for future research on college students with executive functioning challenges and transitional support programs. In this chapter, I also describe implications for integrating grit into transitional programs for students with disabilities. I also considered the intersectionality of Critical Disability theory and grit in program planning. I completed the chapter by proposing recommendations to both community college leaders and to future researchers.

Implications for Integrating Grit into Community College Transitional Programs

The majority of participants shared positive feelings about the community college transitional program in general and about their introduction to the grit concepts proposed in the works of Duckworth (2016) and Stoltz (2014). Some of the student participants in my study were able to clearly define and articulate what the grit concepts were and reported a positive fit between their understanding and application of grit in their own lives and experiences as individuals with a disability. Other participants indicated a superficial familiarity with grit concepts, without an ability to connect grit strategies directly to their lives or view grit as a useful framework to guide their college experiences. By analyzing transcripts through a grit lens, I was able to view how participants' described experiences related to the basic tenets of the grit framework. These findings indicated some potentially positive implications for integrating grit into academic curriculum and programs involving students with disabilities because this approach provided students with a method of reframing their understanding of the

experience of having a disability in society. Further research would be needed to determine whether grit and models of disability could integrate effectively – in a way that better considers power dynamics and societal context. Recommendations from the students themselves included integrating grit concepts and activities into more of their regular class work to reinforce understanding of grit-related strategies and provide opportunities to explore grit further.

Critical Disability Theory and Grit Program Implications

Attending to power and criticality emerged as essential in applying a Critical Disability theory lens to my interpretations of this exploratory study of a grit-enhanced transitional program designed for community college students with executive functioning disabilities. Therefore, the larger community college context of this study was one element that invited deeper critical thought. Just as a tension was noted within participant descriptions of their experiences, a tension also existed between the theoretical frameworks informing this study.

Similar to the development of medical models, Rious and Valentine (2006) described the existence of “identifiable social and scientific formulations” as frameworks for understanding how disability is perceived, treated, and prevented, and for understanding the role of society (e.g., to treat or cure, to provide legal protection) in responding to disability (p. 50). These formulations were evenly divided; two concept models described disability as “the consequence of an individual pathology” and two other formulations described disability as “the consequence of a social pathology” (Rious & Valentine, 2006, p. 50). Understanding disability through an individual pathology lens ultimately placed the focus on the individual’s deficits and how to respond to them.

Understanding disability through a social pathology lens frames disability as a social construct influenced by variables external to the individual and “social responsibilities” that go beyond treating the individual only (Rious & Valentine, 2006, p. 49). In this study, grit theory and the medical model of understanding disability were individualistic in nature, while Critical Disability theory illustrated a systemic approach also concerned with external influences and power dynamics. The theoretical tension in this study may, at times, create a disjointed reading experience. However, this tension was a real paradox occurring within the context of this study, warranting attention in this discussion concerning the implications of a grit-enhanced curriculum from a critical disability theory perspective. Through this perspective, I noticed power dynamics occurring in the study context.

Studying the experiences of students in a program where selective admissions depended upon a medical diagnosis was a unique challenge that highlighted the tension in the theoretical frameworks informing this study. Community college success at a national level often depends upon broad completion metrics. However, community colleges often need to identify and adopt interventions that are individualistic in nature in order to tailor supports and services to unique student needs. College resources are never unlimited, therefore, programs and interventions must have boundaries. At the participating community college, identification as a person with a disability affecting executive functioning was a selective admissions requirement for the transitional program.

Selective admissions is a process where community college programs exert tremendous power. Exemplifying Foucault’s (2011) concept of *governmentality*,

colleges use selective admissions as a rational system of making decisions. A selective admissions process where disability is a factor in the decision-making system is one illustration of a politicization of disability. Pothier and Devlin (2002) asserted that disability and politics cannot be separated; that “issues of disability *are* [my emphasis] questions of power: of who and what gets valued, and who and what gets marginalized.” Basing selective admissions decisions on the existence of a disability combines the institutional power of the community college with both positive and negative aspects of systemic decision-making model – which, in this context involved a model of understanding disability as a “consequence of on individual pathology” (Rious & Valentine, 2006, p. 50). As noted in Chapter II, researchers have linked perceptions of the individual-as-the-problem to the higher levels of social stigma (Pothier & Devlin, 2006; Dunn & Andrews, 2015; Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012).

Similarly, Meekosha and Soldatic (2011) clearly articulated the marginalization of people with disabilities by asserting “disabled people are often referred to as the world’s largest minority. They experience high rates of poverty and poor health, low educational achievements and few employment opportunities” (p. 1383). Yet, educational achievement and workplace readiness were two goals of the community college transitional program. The community college transitional program curriculum included topics such as the history of disability models in the United States, understanding stigma, and learning self-advocacy. Concurrently, students were gradually prepared for the workplace by exploring career interests, examining personal strengths and areas for growth, participating in volunteer opportunities and job shadowing experiences, and

completing a capstone internship in a business environment. The capstone internship provided students with a supported workplace opportunity where the student could utilize skills and knowledge developed through the transitional program to recognize and address stigma and barriers related to their disability. Although, the internship experiences were not explicitly discussed by participants in this study, the program focus on the development of social, academic, and workplace skills were frequently commented on in positive ways by study participants. In fact, participants – even when given the opportunity to critique the program – did not describe stigma or any social barriers within the transitional program.

It was at this complex community college context where study participants were located. This context was a place dependent on an admissions process with an individual pathology focus and it was, paradoxically, the same space where students with disabilities would be taught to understand and challenge ableism in their lives. Use of medical models in intervention programs, therefore, requires careful attention to and monitoring for unintended repercussions. For example, in this study, participants did not report experiencing stigma within their program. Yet, participants did frequently described their disabilities and their understanding of how their disabilities have affected their lives through the use of medical terminology and functional limitation descriptions. Additionally, through stories demonstrating keen interpersonal awareness, participants displayed an awareness of what other, non-disabled peers were doing and planning and how those actions differed from their own. Community college transitional programs incorporating grit, may need to be attentive to the possibility of one individualistically

focused model reinforcing other individualistic models at play; and be prepared to identify and address able-body normativity and deficit-oriented approaches.

Pothier and Devlin (2003) acknowledged that individuals with a disability experience functional challenges that non-disabled peers do not experience, while also asserting, “the biggest challenge comes from mainstream society’s unwillingness to adapt, transform, and even abandon its ‘normal’ way of doing things” (p. 13). It may take the combined efforts of a curriculum designed to foster a social justice approach in understanding disability *and* a strengths-based, grit-enhanced approach to goal setting to counter the lifelong experiences students enter community college with. However, criticisms of grit must also be considered and addressed. Stokas (2015) examined the concept of the American cowboy as a part of her critique of grit as a character development initiative in K12 schools. Stokas (2015) suggested the American cowboy, known for demonstrating grit, persevered because a significant financial investment was at stake; his livelihood depended on the survival of the herd through disastrous weather and other adverse situations. In bringing forth a white, male character so glorified in American culture as an example of grit, Stokas (2015) asserted “grit has long been a way for the privileged to attribute inequality to differences in individual talent and effort while ignoring other key factors such as disparities in access to resources and opportunities.” (p. 516). Therefore, the reality of how disability creates and/or reinforces other social, academic, and economic inequities cannot be forgotten when introducing grit theory and practices to students with disabilities. As noted earlier, participants in this study did not report experiencing stigma at the community college transitional program, however this

was also not a focus of the study. Future research exploring stigma and grit is also recommended.

Recommendations for Community College Leaders

With an unemployment rate double the rate of their non-disabled peers, individuals with a disability are even more dependent than ever on a college education (Hanson & Gulush, 2016; U. S. Bureau of Labor, 2015). As more students with disabilities affecting executive functioning skills enter college, retention of this student population must become a priority for college leaders. Many participants in this study reported they had attended other colleges or had enrolled in college courses at the same higher education institution and participated in courses that were not designed for students with disabilities. These participants described feeling like they were treated differently from other students. The students also expressed how they experienced difficulties in interacting with others in trying to get academic accommodations and how they had trouble keeping up with assignments and changes to their course schedules. Study participants who participated in the grit-enhanced community college transitional program were excited about and satisfied with how they were treated by faculty and staff. They spoke about being treated with respect and receiving support. Participants described being surrounded by professional staff and faculty who had extensive training in working with people with disabilities – especially disabilities affecting executive functioning.

Based on the results of this study, college leaders could benefit from exploring and considering several practices for institutions of higher education to better meet the needs of college students with disabilities. I offer the following recommendations for

community college leaders and administrators who implement and supervise student disability services and transitional programs. Specifically, I recommend that college leaders look at three areas of focus: (a) culture matters, (b) training of faculty and staff is crucial, and (c) curriculum must be intentionally designed.

“Institutional Mindset” is Important. Societal beliefs about individuals with disabilities are reflected in the beliefs and biases of faculty and staff at higher education institutions. College leaders interested in developing effective programmatic support must be cognizant of the cultural beliefs and cognitive biases of all college employees. The college in this study had been actively working on shifting cultural beliefs about students and had a multi-year plan to attempt to reshape campus culture to ensure student-centered values that accounted for multiple student identities. One culture-shifting strategy involved exploring how employees perceived students and asking employees to ask critical questions about what they believed about students and their ability to succeed academically. The grit framework was selected as another part of this culture-shifting strategy because the framework represented a positive, strengths-based approach, which aligned with the developing culture of the college.

Institutions often attempt to shift culture in several ways, including structural approaches to revising policies and procedures. Written policies are necessary to lay out a foundation of expectations from employees and students. Important policies, with supporting procedures on how they should be implemented might include: (a) policies designed to ensure the rights of students with disabilities; (b) policies requiring college employees to adhere to federal anti-discrimination laws; (c) policies requiring faculty to design classes considering the needs of students with disabilities and ensuring faculty

members' responsibility in making materials (including software) accessible. Another way to cultivate a campus culture that values and intentionally includes people with disabilities is to explicitly identify individuals with disabilities within diversity hiring practices. Broadening this definition of diversity would encourage the inclusion of individuals with disabilities – both apparent and invisible – in recruitment and hiring efforts.

Finally, another aspect of a positive, inclusive culture would be the ability of college leaders to understand and respond to the political climate associated with disabilities in higher education. In this study, student participants demonstrated a high level of interpersonal awareness. Their stories illustrated how frequently and how deeply they noticed interactions between students with disabilities and students without disabilities and between students with disabilities and college faculty and administrators.

Individuals who are Interpersonally Aware will be more likely to notice and possibly be sensitive to power imbalances. College leaders need to remain aware of the sheer amount of power imbalances evident in higher education settings for students with disabilities. For examples, power imbalances are consistently present when a student requests accommodation or has to discuss academic accommodations with an instructor or when a student uses accommodations during a testing situation at an assessment center. Sometimes a student might experience a type of disciplinary situation or the student with the disability may file a complaint. In each of these situations, students with disabilities are at a power disadvantage. They are dependent upon the good will and professionalism of the college employee they are interacting with. Training for college

leaders on Critical Disability theory and on the dynamics of power in an institutional setting are strongly recommended.

Training is crucial. Most of my recommendations do involve some type of training. Faculty and staff in the community college transitional program in this study had the tools they needed to teach students who learn differently because an effort was made to hire, train, and continue training the staff on the program team. The result of a focus on training was described by one student who stated faculty and staff treated him “like a normal guy.” Another result may be the absence of reports of stigma and/or other barriers related to disability in the community college transitional program because of the high level of training provided to all members of the transitional program team.

Although college leaders must learn more about the needs of students with disabilities, college leaders also must learn how to recognize and develop the abilities of students who learn differently. College leaders could benefit from specific trainings on how important executive functioning skills are for college students and how necessary it is to provide crucial institutional supports for students with disabilities affecting executive functioning. Other trainings which might be helpful include training on Universal Design for Instruction (UDI), classroom management, how to be sensitive in having difficult conversations, and disability sensitivity training.

College leaders should not underestimate the amount of training needed to help faculty and staff learn to understand and support students with disabilities. Traditionally, a few college professionals are hired and identified as subject matter experts on disabilities in higher education. Many training opportunities on newly developed best practices are available at national and state levels. National organizations dedicated to

supporting individuals with disabilities conduct research and offer professional development options. Nevertheless, ableism is predominant in American society. Many professionals simply have not had exposure to the social justice model of understanding disabilities or to Critical Disability theory. Yet college leaders, faculty, and staff need to be trained in social justice and Critical Disability theory in order to develop a stronger knowledge base and sensitivity to the limitations of approaching disabilities with a medical model.

Quite likely, many employees at colleges and universities are not aware of the strong beliefs they hold about individuals with disabilities. These beliefs then impact how they treat students with disabilities in classes and campus settings. Unexplored beliefs can lead instructors to treat students in prejudicial ways, such as being fearful of a Veteran, assuming a student with Dyslexia is lazy, assuming a student with autism spectrum disorder cannot succeed, or being overly accommodating to a student with anxiety. To initiate cultural changes at their institutions, college leaders must set high expectations around understanding and supporting students with disabilities. One expectation is that all high-level professionals across all divisions be aware of anti-discrimination laws, as well as college policies and procedures and practices in protecting the rights of students with disabilities.

Additionally, college leaders should ensure that diverse training options are present on campus and that they happen regularly. Faculty and staff will continue to defer issues and responsibility to disability subject matter experts unless they have the tools they need to address such issues with confidence. Leaders can encourage individual accountability by providing professionals outside of disability services with opportunities

to learn about accessible software, universal design in instruction, classroom management skills, and student-centered academic advising and academic counseling practices.

Quarterly or at least annual trainings are necessary to address changes in leadership and to ensure disability related issues are taught throughout the academic year. College leaders who do not raise expectations for all divisions at their institutions ultimately contribute to the marginalization of disability issues in higher education. Systemic change is only possible when the entire system is held accountable.

Intentionally-designed curriculum. Finally, higher education support for students with disabilities that considers both academic and social skills is needed. Participant experiences with the grit-enhanced transition program were generally positive. Participants expressed gratitude for the respect and care they received from program staff and faculty. Moreover, participants repeatedly recommended that the program be available at every college campus and to all students with disabilities. Like the grit-enhanced program explored in this study, college transition program curriculum must be intentionally designed.

One example of intentionally designed curriculum involves adding relevant context to the course. A course on finance could cover personal finance and integrate projects incorporating skills needed for independent living. Courses with complicated content could be extended across two semesters to allow for learning at a slower pace. Curriculum utilizing universal design for instruction techniques should be utilized consistently. As an example of universal design, an instructor may use a smart board to write on during class, then later post those notes for all students to review. Using technology in this way reduces the need for note-takers in the classroom and removes

stigma for students with certain disabilities, while still providing the student – all students – with the ability to review class notes in detail on their own time.

More extensive intentional programming is possible and was exemplified by the participating community college's transitional program. The community college's grit-enhanced curriculum included embedded social skills and work readiness rubrics. Repetition and broadening of topics were designed to occur over multiple semesters to reinforce learning for students with disabilities affecting executive functioning. Finally, the curriculum also recognized and attempted to address the impact of stigma and the presence of the medical model in American higher education institutions. Instruction on social models and on how to understand and fight stigma may be required to undo years of discrimination which students encountered prior to attending college. Supporting such curriculum with the use of strength-based strategies (e.g., grit) may also encourage positive ways to perceive and overcome life challenges – as long as societal inequities are not ignored or minimized when adopting such a framework. Therefore, intentionally designed curriculum can occur at many levels and extend over weeks, semesters or years. Community college leaders are encouraged to explore the presence of such curriculum at their institutions. If no curriculum exists, leaders are encouraged to seek out other colleges and universities to learn about and implement best practices appropriate for their settings.

Recommendations for Future Researchers

Throughout this study, journaling and reviewing of the literature were two tasks that helped me understand and chronicle observations regarding method. Future studies would benefit from a deeper analysis of power dynamics prior to finalizing the data

collection plan. Power dynamics in the setting of this study were present and often layered. Examples of potential power imbalances were reflected in many ways such as: employee versus student, administrator versus student, adult versus young adult, person with a disability versus person without a disability, and class, gender, and racial differences. Even within group interviews among peers, power dynamics and other challenges are always possible. I had, to some extent, anticipated the possibility of these dynamics. Yet, in retrospect, supplementing interview data with written options (e.g., essays), or other assignments (e.g., recordings of the student answering questions) might have created opportunities for participants to feel more comfortable and empowered to speak more freely. With participant comfort and empowerment as a greater focus, future researchers may gather richer and more detailed descriptions of participant experiences than I was able to acquire.

Recommendations for Future Research on College Students with Executive Functioning Challenges

Although interviews are a common method of data collection in qualitative studies, researchers who study college students with disabilities are encouraged to carefully consider the power dynamics involved and the potential interaction of disability-related challenges. As described in Chapter II, individuals with disabilities affecting executive functioning, such as autism spectrum disorder, may encounter difficulty with interpersonal communications and social skills. Future researchers are encouraged to carefully consider and plan ways to prioritize participant comfort and a sense of empowerment. In this study, I learned that faculty in the community college transitional program frequently utilized group work to help students feel relaxed,

comfortable, and supported as they work. For individuals who struggle to communicate verbally, or who are not comfortable sharing emotions verbally, the technique of an individual interview may seem intimidating. I found that focus groups were slightly more effective in eliciting more in-depth responses from the student participants in this study.

Future researchers might consider extending the recruitment phase, perhaps choosing to spend more time reaching out to potential participants and letting participants become more familiar with the researcher. Because timelines may be less flexible, future researchers may want to consider a combination of methods for data collection that consider the potential for communication challenges. Alternate data collection methods might include online surveys, essays, and other assignments that are given to the participants by a gatekeeper and then analyzed by the researcher. Alternate methods of prompting conversations may be useful. One example would be to share photographs about the focus of the study (e.g., the college program, conceptual framework) and to then encourage the participant to share their thoughts -verbally or in writing- about the photograph. Similarly, participants may be encouraged to take their own photographs of the study focus (e.g., the college program, conceptual framework) and bring the photos to share and discuss with the researcher. Any of these methods may create comfortable environments that cultivate sharing, especially for individuals who may not naturally share their thoughts and feelings with others.

Summary

This chapter concluded my study exploring the experiences of students with disabilities in a grit-enhanced, community college transitional program. Limitations of

the study were described. Implications for future research were discussed and recommendations were made as they pertained to methodology, grit, and Critical Disability theory. Recommendations for community college leaders included three areas of focus: (a) institutional mindset matters, (b) training of faculty and staff is crucial, and (c) curriculum must be intentionally designed. Recommendations for future researchers emphasized the importance of considering power dynamics during the research design phase. Finally, recommendations for future research with students with disabilities specifically emphasized the use of multiple methods of data collection and of data collection options designed to (a) increase participant comfort; and (b) creatively elicit participant expression of experiences.

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APPENDIX A

Interview protocol will follow what Seidman (2013) referred to as “in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing” (p. 14). Each interview will be planned to last 90 minutes, and the series of three interviews per participant will be held over the course of seven days (Seidman, 2013). Each interview has a specific purpose, which will be upheld. The questions below, for Interview I focus on setting context of the participant’s experience and provides a chance for participants to reflect on the meaning of their context (Seidman, 2013, pp. 20-25).

Interview 1: Building Context

1. I understand you are a student in “College Program A.” When did you start attending?
2. How did you hear about this program?
3. Why did you want to apply to this program?
 - a. What did you already know about the program?
 - b. What interested you the most?
4. What was it like for you to go through the process of applying for this (selective admissions) program?
5. Where, or from whom, did you find support to prepare for applying to this program?
6. What was it like to find out you were selected for this program?
7. Take me through a typical day of college for you.
8. What are you enjoying the most so far?
9. What has been challenging so far?

10. Students in this program experience challenges with executive functioning and may also have a diagnosis of Autism. I have a few questions relating to the idea of disability. Are you comfortable talking about this topic?
11. What does the word disability mean to you?
12. What have you learned about students attending college who also have a disability?
13. What do you think another student from your program might say if asked “what is it like to be a college student and have a disability?”
14. What information do you think new college students who also have a disability should know about being a college student with a disability?
15. I understand a goal of this college program is to learn academic skills and social skills that will help students when they are ready to find and keep a job. What skills have you learned about so far?
16. What social skills are your strengths?
17. What social skills are you working to improve?
18. What academic skills are your strengths?
19. What academic skills are you working to improve?
20. I understand your program has some class activities based on the idea of GRIT (by Dr. Stoltz). What can you tell me about GRIT?
21. Can you give me an example of a time you noticed GRIT in your life or your actions?
22. What are your hopes and dreams after this program?

APPENDIX B

Interview protocol will follow what Seidman (2013) referred to as “in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing, (p. 14).” Each interview will be planned to last 90 minutes, and the series of three interviews per participant will be held over the course of seven days (Seidman, 2013). Each interview has a specific purpose, which will be upheld. The questions below, for Interview II, will explore the details of the participants’ specific experiences, allowing the participants to reconstruct events that occurred in the established context (Seidman, 2013, p. 20-25).

Interview 2: Participant Reconstruction of Experiences

1. Last time we met, we talked about what it was like for you to start school in this program. Let’s go back to that first week of school. What were your first classes that semester?
 - a. What do you remember learning about in Class 1?
 - b. What do you remember learning about in Class 2?
 - c. What do you remember learning about in Class 3?
 - d. What grit-related work did you complete that semester, if any?
 - e. How did you feel about moving into the second semester?
 - f. What classes are you taking now?
 - i. Describe your weekly schedule?
2. We have also talked some about the topic of disability and college. In this program, students talk openly about having a disability. What has this been like for you?
 - a. Describe a time in a class where you would talk about your disability (i.e. How would this topic come up in a class discussion?)?

- b. Where (e.g., high school classes, activities outside of school, or other places) have you participated in discussions where people spoke openly about their experience of having a disability?
 - c. When someone else is talking about their disability, what do you do (i.e., how do you react)?
 - d. What do you think it is like for a new student to talk about having a disability, compared to a student who has been in the program for 2 or more semesters?
 - e. How does the rest of the campus (outside of this program) discuss or acknowledge the idea of a disability?
 - f. What would you like to see different about how the program or the college as a whole discusses or acknowledges individuals with disabilities?
3. When we had our first meeting, we briefly talked about the idea of GRIT. How have you learned about GRIT?
- a. What was it like to take the GRIT Gauge for the first time?
 - b. Describe what happened when you took the GRIT Gauge for the second time?
 - c. How do you feel about GRIT and the GRIT Gauge? (or What does GRIT and the GRIT Gauge mean to you)?
4. What classes are you taking now?
5. How far into the program are you?
6. What are you doing to prepare for an internship, volunteer work, or a job?
7. Describe what has been the most helpful “thing” (e.g., person, activity, experience) for you at this program?

APPENDIX C

Interview protocol will follow what Seidman (2013) referred to as “in-depth, phenomenologically based interviewing, (p. 14).” Each interview will be planned to last 90 minutes, and the series of three interviews per participant will be held over the course of seven days (Seidman, 2013). Each interview has a specific purpose, which will be upheld. The questions below, for Interview III, will focus on allowing time for reflection and “meaning-making” as the participant reviews what has been shared so far and has a chance to comment on what has been shared (Seidman, 2013, p. 20-25).

Interview 3: Participant Meaning-Making

1. Given what you have shared about learning about this program and applying to this program, what have you learned about the process of joining an academic program on a college campus?
 - a. What meaning does this program have for you?
 - b. What has helped you move forward in the program (e.g., family, teachers, friends, skills learned, goals achieved)?
 - c. What future ideas do you have about college / college classes?
2. Given what you have shared about your experiences with a disability, what does it mean to have a program on a college campus that is open about serving with students with disabilities?
 - a. How does this program interact with the other college classes and activities?
 - b. How does the program interact with other students and employees?
 - c. What are your thoughts about programs for students with disabilities at a college?

- d. What would you like to see different on a college campus (as it relates to students with disabilities)?
 - e. What would you like to see remain the same?
- 3. Compare your earlier adult educational experiences (i.e., high school, general college classes) to your experiences in this program? How are these experiences the same? Different?
- 4. In our last meetings, you shared a time you experienced GRIT and you shared your experiences of taking the GRIT gauge two times. What has it meant for you learn about GRIT as part of your college curriculum / teaching?
 - a. What has it been like to participate in activities that focus on GRIT?
 - b. What would you change?
 - c. What would you keep the same?
- 5. If you could tell your favorite teacher something that is important to you about this program and about GRIT, what would you want him or her to know?

VITA

Education

Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville,

TX, A.B.D. Anticipated dissertation defense August 2019. Dissertation title:

“Grit-based curriculum and experiences of community college students with executive functioning challenges: A collective case study.”

Master of Social Work, Family Mental Health, Syracuse University, May 1996.

Bachelor of Science, Psychology, St. Lawrence University, May 1994

Academic Employment

Program Manager, Resource Development & Administration, Lone Star College,

September 2007 - January 2009

Lead Grant Development Manager, Resource Development & Administration, Lone Star

College, January 2009 - April 2010

Director, Grant Development, Resource Development & Administration, Lone Star

College, April 2010 - April 2012

Program Manager, Disability Services, Lone Star College-North Harris, April 2012 -

January 2013

Assistant Dean, Student Services, Lone Star College-Greenspoint Center, January 2013 -

January 2015

Executive Director, Disability Services, Lone Star College-System Office, January 2015 -

present

Presentations at Professional Meetings

Camp, M., Crawford, A., Harrison, P., Lissner, S., Lucio, E., Malloy, K., Merrell, G., & Vires, T. (2018, July). *An Inside Perspective on the Differences Between an ADA Coordinator and a Director of Disability Services*. Invited panel member at the annual conference for the Association on Higher Education Disability, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Malloy, K., & Vires, T. (2018, July). *Investigating the ADA complaint*. Invited presentation at the annual conference for the Association on Higher Education Disability, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Hall, E., Lue King, K., Ploegman, P., & Vires, T. (2017, July). *Investigating the ADA complaint*. Invited presentation at the annual conference for the Association on Higher Education Disability, Orlando, Florida.

Mahler, K., Smith, C., Lue King, K. A., Catalla, P. C., McKenzie, W., and Combs, J. P. (2017, February). *Doctoral students who persist in the dissertation phase: Barriers and facilitating factors to completion*. Invited presentation at the annual conference for the Southwest Educational Research Association, San Antonio, Texas.

Nutt, L.A., Ginnett, A., & Lue King, K.A., (2016, October). *lifePATH™: Expectations for the academic world, business world, and real life*. Invited presentation at the annual conference for College Academic Support Programs in Texas (CASP). Corpus Christi, Texas.

Lue King, K. A., & Hansen, I., (2016, October). *DSO: The Higher Education Teaching Institute (HETI)*. Invited presentation about serving students with disabilities, at a HETI workshop for new Lone Star College faculty. The Woodlands, Texas.

Lue King, K. A. (2016, September). *Disability services stakeholder's summit: Disability training for Lone Star College leaders, at Lone Star College*. The Woodlands, Texas.

Lue King, K. A. (2016, January). *Conversations about classroom accommodations*. Invited presentation at the 2016 Adjunct Faculty Conference at Lone Star College-Kingwood. Kingwood, Texas.

Muhlestein, M., Lewis, A. and Lue King, K. A. (2016, January). *OLS: A replicable associate degree for adults with cognitive disabilities – A turnkey approach*. Invited presentation at the 2016 Community College Futures Assembly. Orlando, Florida.

Catalla, P. D., Holmes, D. L., Lue King, K. A., Korah, A. P., and Landry, E. Y. (2016, February). *Where Do I Belong?: A Multi-Site Campus Ecology Case Study*. Invited presentation at the annual conference for the Southwest Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Dillon, S., Saunders, V., and Lue King, K. A. (2015, November). *Classroom accommodations - Doing the right thing*. Invited presentation at the Expanding Horizons 9th Annual Institute on Learning Differences at Lone Star College-Tomball. Tomball, Texas.

Lue King, K. A. (2015, October). *Conversations about classroom accommodations*. Invited presentation to faculty at Lone Star College-Tomball. Tomball, Texas.

Lue King, K. A. (2013, January). *Disability services and universal design*. Invited presentation at the Spring Faculty Institute, Lone Star College-North Harris. Houston, Texas.

Lue King, K. A. (2012, August). *Raising awareness about students with disabilities*. Workshop presented to faculty at the New Adjunct Faculty Training Day, Lone Star College-North Harris. Houston, Texas.

Professional Membership

Association on Higher Education and Disability, AHEAD, Spring 2015 - Present

Member of the AHEAD Special Interest Group (SIG) for ADA Coordinators,
Spring 2016 – Present

Association on Higher Education and Disability in Texas (AHEAD in Texas),
Spring 2015 - Present

Southwest Educational Research Association, SERA, Fall 2015 – Fall 2017