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Vivian Brantley

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Comparing Allistic and Autistic Honors Students' Perceived Barriers to Succeeding in Honors and Their Preferred Resources

Vivian Brantley

University of Arkansas

Abstract

In recent years, neurodivergent diagnoses have increased, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported that as of 2020, among eight-year-olds, one in 36 children were diagnosed with ASD. Among college students with ASD there are many barriers to succeeding in higher education, such as being predisposed to higher drop-out rates than their allistic counterparts. Students with ASD struggle with many basic skills required to succeed in higher education like language processing and executive function. Because of their ASD diagnosis students may also struggle with the additional responsibilities associated with honors programs such as maintaining certain grade point averages, completing honors credits, and completing an honors capstone or thesis project. This creative project sought to identify the different honors admission, graduation, and maintenance requirements, and the resources available to students by college at the University of Arkansas. This project also aimed to describe the demographics of participants, the needs of participants and the comparison of allistic and autistic students, as well as to create four blog posts as resources for honors students with ASD. Volunteer sampling was used to gather data through an online needs assessment developed by the student researcher. The responses were then analyzed using descriptive statistics and the findings were used to inform some of the blog post content. It was found that of 33 qualifying responses, only five of the student participants were questioning autism and none of the participants had a formal diagnosis. There was also a general call from autistic and allistic students alike for clearer communication on honors requirements and on how to function within an honors program even though most, if not all, of the requested resources were pre-existing. This suggests further investigation into communication and presentation of pre-existing

resources is warranted. Also, more in-depth research should be conducted with honors students who have been formally diagnosed with ASD.

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Introduction

Background and Need

Increasing Number of Autism Spectrum Disorder Diagnoses

In recent years, neurodivergent diagnoses have been increasing. Specifically, “the number of individuals being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is on the rise” (Rutherford et al., 2016, p. 5). There are many definitions of ASD, but Volkmar and Pauls (2003) defined it as “a disorder characterized by severe difficulties in social interaction and communication, and with unusual behaviors” (p. 1133). According to Rutherford et al. (2016), the CDC released a report stating that in 2000, one in 150 individuals were diagnosed with ASD, by 2012 one in 88 individuals were diagnosed, and by 2014, one in 68 individuals were diagnosed. More recently, the CDC reported that as of 2020, among eight-year-olds, one in 36 children were diagnosed with ASD (CDC, 2023).

College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

College is already a time of immense change and planning for many people and “for students with ASD, the planning is usually more involved” (Rutherford et al., 2016, p. 69). There are many steps to consider when transitioning to college including: Where will the student live? What institution will they choose? What accommodations are available? Is there any support specifically for neurodivergent students available? While “post-secondary education is a viable option for many individuals with ASD, it entails a great deal of planning and support to aid the student” (Roberts, 2010, p. 158). A study by White et al. (2011) found that “between 0.7 per cent and 1.9 per cent of college students could meet criteria for High Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HFASD)” (p. 1). White et al. (2011) also found that of these students, 5/677, had

already been diagnosed with HFASD and that many of them self-reported struggles with anxiety and depression along with some other impairments.

Honors Colleges and Challenges for Honors Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Honors colleges used to be underutilized resources at universities and are now much more common. A study by Sederberg (2008) found that “in 1983 only two colleges... had any students enrolled in their honors programs” with only 0.004% participation (p. 11). Many of these participating students only retained interest during their first year and did not pursue finishing a thesis (Sederberg, 2008, p. 11). As of 2005 “honors programs and colleges [were] commonplace in U.S. higher education... with programs in 60% of all four-year institutions and over 40% of all two-year institutions” (Achterberg, 2005, p. 75). More recently, a study from Scott et al. (2017), documented that at the time of the study there were 200 Honors Colleges across institutions in the United States with 1,300 programs representing various areas of study. In terms of honors students with ASD, Yager (2016) suggested that honors programs have many diverse types of students, in any department, that can be found to have ASD, although none of the students reported utilizing accommodations relating to an ASD diagnosis.

Problem Statement

The diagnoses of neurodivergent and autistic people are increasing (Volkmar & Pauls, 2003). However, autistic college students face additional barriers such as language processing and executive function (Rutherford et al., 2016). Specifically, in Honors Colleges, there may be additional unique challenges in completing honors program requirements, such as a capstone research project with research committees. Conducting a needs assessment among current students with and without ASD in the Honors College at the University of Arkansas will help the

researcher see firsthand what students may need after navigating a portion of the honors program. For those students questioning or diagnosed, ASD is not a one size fits all diagnosis and there is not just one way to assist autistic and neurodivergent students. More resources and types of aid are needed specifically for autistic and neurodivergent students in post-secondary education systems.

Purpose Statement

The purposes of this creative project were to (1) describe the demographic characteristics and needs of allistic and autistic honors students at the University of Arkansas and (2) to create a series of digital resources for students, based on pre-determined topics, and supplemented by students' survey responses.

Research Objectives

The following research objectives were utilized to guide this creative project:

- Identify the honors admission and graduation requirements for current students, Honors College resources and additional honors resources by college, and community mental health resources available for current students.
- Describe the demographic characteristics of participating honors students.
- Describe participants' needs related to being a member of the Honors College to compare responses between allistic and autistic honors students.
- Create a series of four blog posts, focused on the student researcher's experience, pre-or post-ASD diagnosis campus and community resources, recommendations for allistic and autistic honors students on navigating honors processes, and recommendations for faculty

for working with allistic and autistic honors students supplemented by participants' responses.

Definitions

Autism Spectrum Disorder – ASD is “a disorder characterized by severe difficulties in social interaction and communication, and with unusual behaviors” (Volkmar et al., 2003, p. 1133).

Allistic – Allistic is a term used to refer to someone “not affected by autism” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Neurodivergent – Neurodivergent refers to “having or related to a type of brain that is often considered as different from what is usual, for example that of someone who has autism” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Neurotypical – Neurotypical describes those “not having, or not associated with, a brain condition, especially autism, that is often considered as different from what is usual” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Literature Review

Overview and History of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism was first described in 1943 by Leo Kanner but was not considered a valid diagnosis until the 1980's with the diagnosis term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) being coined (Volkmar & Pauls, 2003). There were questions and concerns that autism was not a valid condition as it was thought to be related to childhood schizophrenia, but this was eventually resolved (Volkmar & Pauls, 2003). Initially autism was seen as a rare disorder but now, after further studies, it is becoming increasingly common (Volkmar & Pauls, 2003,). There have been

many versions of the definition of ASD over the years as Rutherford et al. (2016) described in *Going to College with Autism: Tips and Strategies from Successful Voices*. Previous diagnostic terms have included Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder – not otherwise specified, and High-Functioning Autism (Rutherford et al., 2016). In Rutherford et al. (2016), ASD was defined as:

A group of pervasive, developmental disabilities that cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges that manifest before the age of three. ASDs (Autism Spectrum Disorders) are spectrum disorders that affect each person in different ways and can range from very mild to severe... (p. 2)

Characteristics and Traits of ASD

Autism is a disorder “characterized by severe difficulties in social interaction and communication, and with unusual behaviors” (Volkmar & Pauls, 2003, p. 1133). In a study conducted by Volkmar and Pauls (2003) to determine the effects of autism, several diagnostic behaviors were identified. The behaviors identified were qualitative impairment in social interaction, qualitative impairments in communication, and restricted patterns of behavior and interests with an onset of symptoms before age 3 years (Volkmar & Pauls, 2003).

In the diagnosis guidelines presented by Volkmar and Pauls (2003) “emphasis is placed on social domain rather than other areas, and the importance of taking into account mental age and developmental level in making a diagnosis is repeatedly emphasized” (p. 1133). Autism is typically noticed by three years old as the child fails to develop normally. Also, there was suggested to be "a three-to-four-fold" increase in autism in boys rather than girls (Volkmar &

Pauls, 2003, p. 1134). Not all these traits will apply to every autistic individual, but it is a strong basis for determining characteristics.

Known Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder in the United States

Autism, as stated earlier, initially was viewed as a rare disorder but now, after further study, it is being accepted as becoming increasingly common (Volkmar & Pauls, 2003). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) autism diagnoses in 2010 amounted to 1 in 68 children while as of 2020 that diagnosis rate has increased to 1 in 36 children (CDC, 2023). This shows how in a 10-year period the rates of ASD diagnosis identification have shifted.

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Higher Education

A study conducted by Shattuck et al. (2012) found that students with ASD were enrolled in postsecondary education at a lower rate than other groups with learning and speech/language disabilities and impairments. A book by Rutherford et al. (2016) stated that out of 50,000 students finishing high school, only 36% of those students continue to higher education. Of those students who pursue higher education, only 40% of those students disclose their diagnosis to their school. Without disclosing a diagnosis, the remaining students cannot access accommodations through their institutions. In fact, in a study conducted with autistic students in an institution's honors program by Yager et al. (2016), it was found that "no participant reported receiving academic accommodations specifically due to autism" (p. 86). However, Yager et al. (2016) did describe an example of a student with autism and ADHD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) who did report receiving various accommodations, but the accommodations pertained only to the student's ADHD diagnosis and were not aimed at

addressing their ASD diagnosis. Yager et al. (2016) also found that most students who participated in the study resided in the College of Engineering in the Iowa State University Honors Program.

Barriers to Higher Education for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The book entitled *Going to College with Autism: Tips and Strategies from Successful Voices* by Rutherford et al. (2016) discussed several barriers to higher education for students with ASD, noting that students with ASD can struggle with functions such as language processing, emotional language, ironic language, comprehension, sensory integration, and executive function, which relate to many of the tasks and environments college students are required to navigate.

Scott (2020) acknowledged that “a gap in the research exists in knowing how college success barriers influence persistence for students with ASD” (p. 4). In an article by Cage and Howes (2020), the researchers stated that “to the best of our knowledge, no other studies have examined” [this] (p. 1665). Cage and Howes (2020) also accounted for the fact that autistic students are subjected to a higher risk of dropping out of a university before completing their degree. This risk needs to be further researched to develop a better understanding of the autistic experience with dropping out of higher education because, as expressed by Cage and Howes (2020) autistic people have poorer employment outcomes than their neurotypical counterparts.

Honors Colleges in Higher Education

As previously stated, estimates in the 2000s showed that honors programs were present in “60% of all four-year institutions and over 40% of all two-year institutions” (Achterberg, 2005, p. 75). An article presented by the Census of U.S. Honors Programs and Colleges reported

on the various types of opportunities offered through Honors Colleges or Honors Programs (Scott et al. 2017). Results showed that 95% of all institutions with honors courses have a general education credit and that 91% of institutions have honors specific courses restricted to use only by students enrolled in the honors program (Scott et al. 2017). It was also reported that 80% of institutions engaged students in inter-disciplinary and research-based courses (Scott et al. 2017).

Common practices found in up to 49% of institutions included thesis requirements and capstone projects as well as service and experience-based learning. Less commonly, less than 20% of institutions had honors specific study abroad programs and distance learning methods (Scott et al. 2017). Within all these components, students complete an average of 20% of their courses from within their honors programs (Scott et al. 2017).

Development Plan

This section consists of the development plan and how the researcher conducted a needs assessment of honors students with and without ASD, analyzed the data, and then used that data to produce relevant resources for the allistic and ASD populations in the Honors College at the University of Arkansas.

Phase 1: Conduct a Needs Assessment

The first phase of the project included developing a needs assessment for allistic and autistic honors students with the researcher's committee, which supplemented and informed the creation of creative resources.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study consisted of Honors students at the University of Arkansas who self-identified as allistic, questioning ASD, or professionally diagnosed with ASD. The sample from this population consisted of junior and senior undergraduate Honors students who fit these criteria. The students were sampled via volunteer sampling. Muijs (2012) described volunteer sampling as “sampling [that] occurs when we ask people to volunteer to take part in our research, through an advertisement in a local paper or professional publication, a notice on a university campus, etc.” (Chapter 10). Email recruitment was used to seek participants.

Instrumentation

The researcher developed a Qualtrics survey with the assistance of the lead mentors and research committee members. The survey included such sections for gathering demographics, prompts to assist creating the resources, and general information regarding students' needs and perceptions. The questionnaire format consisted of a mixture of open and closed response questions and included an additional consent section to share quotations anonymously for use in the creative resources.

Data Collection

For the data collection, the researcher sought Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Arkansas (Protocol #2212440993) and requested each honors program director forward a recruitment email to the study population. The survey was kept open for one month, with a follow up email sent on day 15 to all honors program directors to request that the survey be forwarded.

Phase 2: Analyze Data

The survey data were analyzed in Stats IQ, the statistical analysis tool in Qualtrics. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, means, and standard deviations were run for demographic questions and questions related to students' needs. The results were then grouped by neurotype to allow comparison. The open-ended questions were reviewed by the researcher and mentor for common themes, after downloading open response answers as a PDF.

Phase 3: Develop a Series of Blog Posts

There were five main steps involved in planning, developing, editing, and posting the blog posts. The first step was to draft a series of blog posts based on some predetermined topics that were built out utilizing the survey responses. The content areas focused on the student researcher's experience, pre-and post-diagnosis campus and community resources, recommendations for autistic honors students to navigate honors processes, and recommendations for faculty regarding the autistic student's experience. After drafting the blog posts, step two consisted of developing accompanying graphics to accompany each post with supplemental information, resource links, and additional survey findings such as quotes and statistics to illustrate specific discussion points.

Step three consisted of sending out the blog drafts and their accompanying graphics to the committee for feedback and edits. Once the blogs and graphics were finalized by the student researcher and the committee, the student researcher planned to contact the Honors College about publishing to their blog, along with other chosen social media platforms to complete step four. The fifth and optional final step of developing the blog posts was to send a follow up

assessment to autistic honors students for feedback on the blog drafts to guide recommendations for future resources if time allowed.

Results, Design Process, and Creative Works

This section will discuss the results of the project, organized by research objective. The results of the needs assessment, the design process for the blog posts, and the final creative works will also be discussed. All creative materials can be found in Appendix D.

Results

Research Objective One

The first research objective was to identify the honors admission and graduation requirements for current students, Honors College resources and additional honors resources by college, and community mental health resources available for current students. All tables are available in Appendix C.

Honors Admission Requirements for Current Students by College. Most of the honors programs across the University of Arkansas campus have different admission, maintenance, and graduation requirements, although there were a few similarities in terms of GPA or timeline. This section describes the admission requirements for currently enrolled students intending to join an honors program. Both the College of Education and Health Professions and the Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design require current students to have a cumulative GPA of at least 3.50, and not be within three major semesters of their anticipated graduation date (Honors College, n.d.).

The College of Engineering requires that current students wanting to transfer into the Engineering Honors Program have and maintain a cumulative GPA of at least 3.50 (Honors College, n.d.). Next, the Dale Bumpers College of Agriculture, Food and Life Sciences requires that current students wanting to transfer into the Bumpers College Honors Program have and maintain a cumulative GPA of at least 3.50 and have completed no more than 62 credit hours (Honors College, n.d.).

The Fulbright College of Arts Sciences requires that current students wanting to transfer into the Fulbright Honors Program have and maintain a cumulative GPA of at least 3.50 and have already completed at least two full-time semesters before applying. Similar to other programs, students within three major semesters of graduation are not admitted into the Fulbright Honors Program (Honors College, n.d.). Lastly, the Walton College of Business requires that students have completed one semester, have, and maintain a cumulative GPA of at least 3.75, and not be within three major semesters of their anticipated graduation date. Current students transferring into Walton Honors Program from another Honors Program on campus must have a cumulative GPA of at least 3.50 (Honors College, n.d.).

Honors Graduation Requirements by College. Next, the graduation requirements for each Honors Program will be presented. To graduate from the College of Education and Health Professions' Honors Program, the student must complete a minimum of 18 honors credit hours including several required courses in student's area of study, along with completion of an honors thesis or project (College of Education and Health Professions Honors Program, n.d.).

To graduate from the College of Engineering's Honors Program, the student must complete a minimum of 12 honors credit hours including six credit hours specifically dedicated

to engineering coursework, along with the completion of an honors thesis or an undergraduate research or design experience (College of Engineering, n.d.).

To graduate from the Dale Bumpers College of Agriculture, Food and Life Sciences' Honors Program, the student must complete at least 15 honors credit hours composed of 9-12 credit hours from honors courses, and three to six honors thesis hours. Students must also complete an honors thesis (Bumpers College Honors Program, n.d.).

To graduate from the Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design's Honors Program, the student must complete a minimum of 18 honors credit hours including a variety of honors professional core and honors professional elective courses, along with a capstone project (Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design, n.d.).

To graduate from the Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences' Honors Program, there are two paths, through College Honors and Departmental Honors. The College Honors program includes taking approximately one-third of their coursework in an honors format, including research hours, honors colloquia, honors core courses, and the thesis hours (Honors College, n.d.). Students pursuing Departmental Honors take at least 12 hours of honors courses and complete an honors thesis (Honors College, n.d.).

To graduate from the Walton College of Business' Honors Program, there are two paths, through the Walton Scholars Program for first semester freshmen and the Departmental Scholars Program, for students admitted after their first semester. The Walton Scholars Program will soon require 21 hours of honors courses, from a specific list, a variety of required courses, some with specific grade requirements, an honors capstone course, and an honors thesis (Honors College, n.d.). The Departmental Scholars Program requires 12 hours of honors courses, with similar

courses required from specific lists, an honors capstone course, and an honors thesis (Honors College, n.d.).

Honors College Resources and Honors Resources by College. Research objective one also aimed to identify and summarize all available honors resources by college (Appendix Table C1). The resources were summarized for each college and the Honors College. The resources provided by the Honors College can be accessed through a SharePoint site called the Honors College Futures Hub, which centralizes resources for the following topics: global experiences, research, engagement, academics, trajectory, and an overview of the honors programs at each college, as well as a calendar for upcoming Honors College workshops and events (Honors College Futures Hub, n.d.).

Table C1 was constructed to identify the available resources on the different honors program pages, organized by college. The table indicated whether the Honors College or an individual honors program provided examples of an honors thesis, resources for identifying a mentor, or available projects. The Honors College website addressed all three of these resources but other than that, the only honors program webpage to address all three types of resources was the College of Education and Health Professions' (COEHP) Honors Program. The Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences' (AFLS) Honors Program included webpages for identifying a mentor and previous examples of honors theses. The Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences' (ARSC) honors program also provided examples of previous honors theses, but no resources for identifying a mentor or available projects. The Walton College of Business' honors program provided examples of past honors theses and some open project opportunities. Lastly, the Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design (FJAD) and the College of Engineering (ENGR) honors program webpages did not address any of these resources.

Mental Health Services Available to Current Students. There are several resources that can be accessed through various campus offices for student support. For example, the University of Arkansas has multiple resources. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) is a department where students can seek help with navigating diagnoses and other mental health related issues (Mental Health Services, 2022).

The Center for Educational Access (CEA) is a department where students can seek accommodation during their time at the institution with a recommendation or diagnosis from CAPS or a physician. The CEA provides services such as alternate testing locations, note taking services, extended deadlines, text to speech document conversions, and even room accommodations such as service animals, single occupancy rooms, and non-communal bathrooms (Need Services, 2022). The Center for Educational Access at the University of Arkansas does have a wide variety of accommodations such as extended deadlines, note takers, alternate testing locations, and even housing accommodations such as single occupancy rooms. Though these accommodations do not cater to the needs of students with ASD.

There is also an ASD-specific resource accessible at the University of Arkansas called the Autism Support Program. However, this resource presents a few challenges though because it requires multiple documents for students to apply, such as the students most recent Individualized Education Program, two recommendation letters, and a neuropsychological report stating all diagnoses (Autism Support Program, n.d.). Students who have received later in life diagnoses, or who are undiagnosed may not have all these documents, and therefore will not qualify for the program. There is also a high fee of \$5,000 per semester to be enrolled in this program which also increases the level of inaccessibility to this program (Frequently Asked Questions, n.d.).

Research Objective Two

The second research objective was to describe the demographic characteristics of participating honors students. Based on the data collected by our survey, we were not able to establish a connection with the Autistic honors student population, as no participants reported receiving a formal diagnosis. The results will be presented separately by the participants' self-reported neurotype. The responses to each question were grouped into two broad categories: *allistic*, or not autistic, and *questioning autistic*.

Participants' Classification. As reported in Table C2, there were 32 participants who fit the criteria of being a junior or senior to complete the survey. Of these responses, 10 of the juniors reported being allistic and two reported questioning autism with juniors making up 37.5% of the total response pool. There were 20 seniors, making up 62.5% of the response pool, with 15 reporting being allistic, three who were questioning autism, and two who reported preferring not to state their neurotype.

Participants' Self-Reported Neurotype and Age of Questioning. As reported in Table C3 and condensed in Table C4, of 33 respondents, 26 reported being allistic – non autistic making up 78.78% of the response pool, 5 reported they were questioning autism making up 15.15% of the response pool, and 2 preferred not to answer making up 6.06% of the response pool. One participant reported the age at which they began questioning the possible presence of autism as starting around age 10 (Table C5).

Participants Demographic Characteristics. Of the participants, 24 responded to the demographic questions. All the respondents (100%) reported identifying as White, including the five students who reported questioning autism. Of the allistic students, only two reported having

a Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, equating to 8.33% of the respondents of the question, and the remaining 91.67% of respondents reported being non-Hispanic or Latino.

In terms of biological sex, there were three allistic and one questioning autistic student who reported being assigned male at birth, equating to 16.67% of responses. The other 83.33% of responses came from 16 allistic and four questioning autistic students who reported being assigned female at birth. In terms of gender identity, of these students all but one (4.17%) identified as the gender assigned at birth. This one response came from a student who reported questioning autism and identifying as non-binary/third gender.

The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 30 years of age with most of the students reporting being 21 years old (45.83%). The frequency of ages then decreased as follows: 20 (25.00%), 22 (16.67%), and ages 19, 28, 30 (4.17% each).

Colleges and Majors. Participants belonged to four of the six colleges within the University of Arkansas, the most being from Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design consisting of 33.33%. Of the participants, 23 entered an open response with their major, reporting 15 different majors, with a major in Architecture being the majority consisting of 21.74% of the respondents.

Questioning Autistic Students' Information-Seeking Behaviors. The five participants who reported questioning autism were shown two questions to select how they initially learned and currently learn about ASD. The initial location for acquiring knowledge varied from that of current knowledge seeking in the participants. Initially, 40% of participants reported learning about autism through parents, 40% reported learning through family, and 20% through a

pediatrician. As for current information seeking, websites and social media were more popular platforms with the highest response rates at 27.78% and 16.87%, respectively.

CEA Accommodation Status. Of 30 responses total, among the 25 allistic students, only one student (3.33%) reported being registered for accommodation through the CEA. The remaining five responses were from those questioning autism, none of which reported being registered for accommodation.

Research Objective Three

The third research objective was to describe participants' needs related to being a member of the Honors College to compare responses between allistic and autistic honors students.

Allistic Students' Self-Reported Struggles in College and in Honors. Through a 'check all that apply' question, allistic students reported most struggling with stress management (selected 17 times), staying organized (selected 10 times) second, and then getting involved on campus, building relationships with peers, and building relationships with professors all tying for third most frequently selected (selected six times).

Based on the 16 open response answers focused on honors specific challenges, allistic students reported that they struggled with the thesis process in general, with picking a thesis topic, and finding a mentor. The allistic students also expressed struggling with time management and balancing work, school, honors, and social components of their life while keeping up with each category.

Allistic Students' Preferred Supports from Faculty and Preferred Resources. The allistic student participants reported in an open response question that they would have liked

more encompassing guidance on the honors thesis, with direction towards preexisting resources on how to pick a thesis and a mentor as a freshman. One comment stated that they would have liked more courses specific to completing the capstone research project in the curriculum before a large amount of their coursework was already under way. The allistic students did not have specific requests for faculty to know, but they did indicate they prefer blog posts (ranked first) and student organizations (ranked second) as their preferred resource deliverables.

Questioning Autistic Students' Self-Reported Struggles in College and in Honors.

Among responses to the question about students' struggles in college, with the option to 'check all that apply,' the questioning autistic students reported to struggle most with building relationships with peers (selected four times), then with getting involved on campus, stress management, and communication with professors all tied for the next most frequent concerns (each option was selected three times). In the open responses about their honors-related struggles, among the questioning autistic students there were four responses submitted. In these four responses, students questioning autism indicated struggling with motivation, seeking assistance, multitasking to keep up with honors responsibilities, and finding a project that they find overall interesting. One student shared that they were considering dropping honors because of the anxiety caused by the honors process and the seeming lack of guidance and assistance available.

When asked what they would like faculty members to know about working with a potentially autistic honors student, one participant expressed that: "It [the honors thesis] is the most anxiety inducing thing to ever exist, and I have not even started it." Another respondent anonymously shared:

“Communication, regardless of how simple, can be very daunting, especially reaching out to begin a project or while struggling. Imposter syndrome is really tough to deal with, and everyone I’ve talked to regarding honors thesis projects has expressed that they struggle with it consistently. Any kindness and support always helps!”

Questioning Autistic Students’ Preferred Supports from Faculty and Preferred

Resources. The neurodiverse and questioning autistic students indicated that they preferred to see support resources in the form of social media posts (ranked first) and workshops (ranked second). In an open response option for this question, the students suggested the use of more email communication and assigning mandatory honors mentors or advisors to students to facilitate the honors process with more supervision and guidance.

There were five students questioning autism who answered the open response prompt asking what supports they would have been interested in their freshman year. The students stated that if they could go back and ask for additional support in their freshman year, the main change they would request would be open and clear communication from their professors and their respective programs on navigating the standard classwork and honors processes related to achieving the appropriate number of honors credit hours and how to navigate developing an honors thesis.

Questioning Autistic Students’ Perceptions of the Impacts of a Possible ASD

Diagnosis. The students who reported questioning autism were asked a Likert-style question to determine their perceptions toward a possible ASD diagnosis in relation to navigating college and their honors program. Participants were asked to use a sliding scale from one to five, with one being Strongly Disagree and five being Strongly Agree to share their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement.

In response to item one, regarding participants' perception of an ASD diagnosis impeding their success in the Honors College, the mean response was 2.20 ($sd = 1.17$) indicating participants disagreed with item one. This disagreement shows that students did not believe a possible diagnosis would negatively harm their success in the Honors College.

In response to item two, regarding participants' perception of an ASD diagnosis impacting moving forward in the honors process, the mean response was 2.80 ($sd = 0.75$) indicating participants were neutral toward the item. This neutrality shows that students did not have consequential concerns about their ability to progress in the honors process.

In response to item three, regarding participants' perceptions of knowing where to access resources to assist with their possible disability, the mean response was 3.20 ($sd = 1.72$) indicating participants were neutral toward item three. This neutrality also shows that students did not have consequential concerns about their ability to progress through the honors process.

In response to item four, regarding participants' perceptions of their ability to seek school accommodations, the mean response was 2.60 ($sd = 1.62$) indicating participants disagreed with the statement. This showed that the five students questioning autism reported not feeling confident in how to seek accommodations.

Design Process and Creative Works

Research Objective Four

The final research objective was to create a series of four blog posts, serving as a series of creative products to illustrate the survey findings. The blog post topics were chosen by the student researcher and lead mentors. Findings from the survey were incorporated into the blog posts.

The Student Researcher's Perspective. The first blog post focused on the student researcher's experience with navigating an ASD diagnosis and navigating honors processes. To begin this process, the student researcher and mentor brainstormed a list of general prompts for the student to do private free-style writing. The prompts included items such as 'how did you get your diagnosis?', 'how does your diagnosis make you feel?', 'how has your diagnosis affected your schooling experience?', and 'what would you say to other questioning students?'. Once the free-style writing was completed, the student researcher identified the information they were comfortable sharing in a blog post with the public. The student researcher focused on how they grew up and were perceived, the honors process and its stressors, their diagnosis, and how this impacted their choice in research projects. After review from the committee the blog post was approved pending basic grammar and spelling edits.

Pre-or post-ASD Diagnosis Campus and Community Resources. The second blog post focused on identifying campus and community resources for autistic students and for students who may be questioning an ASD diagnosis. This post was created by first researching the current resources available on campus for information of varying degrees and recording some basic information about them. Then once four resources were identified, the student researcher moved forward with repeating the process for identifying resources in the community. Once all the information was gathered it was presented as a list with further details below as well as the links to access the resources. Given that the blog posts will be digital, the links listed will be active.

Recommendations for Allistic and Questioning Autistic Honors Students on Navigating Honors Processes. The third blog post focused on creating recommendations for current honors students to look at when they need assistance. The student researcher collected

some general resources from the Honors College to link in the blog post. Then the researcher reflected on their personal experience with the honors process and what they would have liked for someone to say to them. With this information collected, the researcher created a list of suggestions with some corresponding links to further act on the suggestions. Some of the suggestions were more direct with instructions like looking at the Honors College website while others were more based on emotional support, such as instructing students to just “take a deep breath”.

Recommendations for Faculty for Working with Allistic and Questioning Autistic Honors Students. The fourth blog post focused on what students wanted faculty to know about the honors process based on their open responses to the survey. To develop this post the main themes from survey questions and open responses were pulled for both the allistic and questioning autism student responses. These main themes were then expressed in a 'letter' to the faculty of the Honors College from the Honors Students.

Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

This section will discuss the discussion and conclusions, organized by research objective, and the recommendations for future research.

Discussion and Conclusions

Relating to research objective one, all the honors programs allowed students to join after their first semester, with various GPA entrance and maintenance requirements, ranging from 3.50 cumulative GPA or higher. The graduation requirements all included the completion of honors credit hours ranging from 12 to 18 hours depending on the program as well as the completion of a capstone research or thesis project. This program structure mirrors that of other

honors programs as reported by the Census of U.S. Honors Programs and Colleges in that honors programs often require specific honors course credits and a final project (Scott et al., 2017). Each of the honors program webpages presented information differently, and in some cases, not at all. For example, some of the webpages included certain resources such as examples of previous honors projects, how to find available mentors, and currently available projects, while others lacked some if not all these resources. The Honors College housed the most comprehensive set of resources, but the honors program webpages varied in the information presented, and the actual webpage layouts.

For research objective two, it was found that most survey responses were from Caucasian students who were not of Hispanic or Latino decent. Most responses were also from female students who identified with their sex assigned at birth. One third of the responses were from students in the Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design and the majority being architecture majors. The responses came from students aged 19 to 30 years, the majority being 21 years old. The survey responses were primarily from allistic students and there were no students with a formal ASD, only students who were questioning autism, which will be discussed more in the limitations and recommendations.

For research objective three, the allistic students reported struggling with similar aspects of college than the questioning autistic students did. Both the allistic and questioning autism students reported a struggle with stress management, organization, and getting involved on campus and building relationships with peers and professors. The students questioning autism did express one struggle that differed from the allistic students in that they reported struggling with communicating with professors. These struggles are also represented in other studies focusing on students with ASD. In a study by Yager et al. (2016) it was reported that the students

within that study did not have accommodations specific to autism which mirrors the findings of this study. None of the students in the current project reported having accommodations specifically for autism but this is likely because none of the responding students actively had a formal ASD diagnosis. Another work of literature by Rutherford et al. (2016) detailed how students with autism struggle with varying types of communication which ties into the results reported by the students questioning autism in this study struggling with communication with professors.

Regarding research objective four, this study developed creative deliverables in the form of four blog posts. These posts focused on the student researchers' experience, campus and community resources, recommendations for navigating honors, and recommendations for faculty from students.

Limitations of the Study

One of the study's main limitations is that the initial goal was to identify the needs of autistic honors students compared to their allistic counterparts. However, of the five questioning students, there were none with formal ASD diagnoses. The experiences reported by questioning autistic students reflect their perspective and life experience from a questioning or self-diagnosed perspective, but these findings may not reflect the experiences of formally diagnosed autistic honors students, or honors students at the University of Arkansas overall. Additionally, the response to the survey was low, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized to a larger audience.

Recommendations for Future Research

The first recommendation is that a more in-depth study should be conducted with a group of honors students who are confirmed autistic either through self or professional diagnosis. In this way, it could be ensured that appropriate representation of the autistic community in research relating to honors programs takes place. Also, participants should be recruited for a longer period and through personal contacts, and more purposeful selection, paired with snowball sampling. With a longer recruitment period and an increased variety of recruitment methods, the data collected could be more representative of the autistic communities within honors programs.

The second recommendation is that increased efforts should be made to communicate about resources available, during the first year of honors and beyond. These types of resources already exist through the Honors College, and on honors program webpages. However, the honors program webpages each included different information, with varying levels of inclusivity, presented in a range of different formats. Based on the student responses, the students struggle to complete tasks that there are several resources addressing, suggesting a possible lack of awareness of the existing resources or need for additional or different communication approaches. The survey responses contain a call to action for clarifying what it means to be an honors student.

Third, future research could investigate honors students' preferences for communication and website layouts across the honors programs, to identify if there are statistically significant differences preferences across student demographics. For example, this study determined that allistic students preferred blog posts and student organizations or clubs while questioning autistic students reported preferences for social media posts and workshops. By collecting more

information about these preferences through future projects, future researchers would be able to create deliverables relevant to students and even see if there are trends or differences among students officially diagnosed with ASD across honors programs.

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Appendix A

Approved Survey Instrument

Purpose of the Study & Consent Wording

The purpose of this research is to gather demographic information and personal experiences of allistic and autistic junior and senior students in the honors program at the University of Arkansas to determine where there may be gaps in support for students in the honors process.

Institutional Review Board protocol #2212440993 was approved for this study by the University of Arkansas review committee. Your completion of the survey represents your implied consent to participate in this study. Data will be kept anonymous to the fullest extent possible. This survey should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete.

The results of this study may be used to guide internal decisions within the Honors College and various honors programs on campus, inform the creation of digital resources for the honors student body for online publication as a part of this creative thesis, and to inform external organizations about the study's findings through poster and/or oral presentations or journal article submissions.

As a potential benefit to participating in this study, you will be given the option to include your name and University of Arkansas email at the end of the questionnaire to be considered for a \$75 gift card (one available), understanding that the winner will be contacted by our office. After the gift card winner is selected, the data column with name and email will be deleted and in no way will be linked to your survey response.

If you have questions or concerns about this study, you may contact the research supervisors Lisa Wood at lswood@uark.edu or Isabel Whitehead at iwhitehe@uark.edu, or student investigator Vivian Brantley at vrbrantl@uark.edu. For questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Ro Windwalker, the University's IRB Coordinator, at (479) 575-2208 or by email at irb@uark.edu.

Screening Questions

0. Are you a member of the Honors College at the U of A?

.5 What is your current classification? We are specifically seeking feedback from junior and senior honors students.

1. Freshman (survey flow will take students to the end of the survey)
2. Sophomore (survey flow will take students to the end of the survey)
3. Junior
4. Senior

Block 1 - Identifying Allistic or Autistic Status

1. Which category best fits your circumstances?
 - a. Allistic – non-autistic
 - b. Allistic - non-autistic otherwise neurodivergent
 - c. Autistic – diagnosed by a professional
 - d. Autistic – self diagnosed
 - e. Awaiting autism assessment
 - f. Questioning autism – otherwise neurodivergent
 - g. Questioning autism – not otherwise neurodivergent
 - h. Prefer not to answer
2. If you answered yes, as diagnosed autistic by a professional or self-diagnosed, at what age did you receive a diagnosis or self-diagnose? (Note: the online survey flow will only show this question to those who answer as self-identifying as autistic or questioning autistic, highlighted above)
 - a. Open response
 - b. Prefer not to answer
3. How did you initially learn about autism spectrum disorder? (Note: the online survey flow will only show this question to those who answer as self-identifying as autistic or questioning autistic, highlighted above)
 - a. Social media platform(s)
 - b. Website(s)
 - c. Blog(s)
 - d. Counselor(s)
 - e. Psychologist(s) or Psychiatrist(s)
 - f. Family member(s)
 - g. Friend(s)
 - h. K-12 school referral
 - i. Pediatrician
 - j. Primary care provider(s)
 - k. Other (write in additional options)
4. Where do you currently seek information about autism spectrum disorder? (Note: the online survey flow will only show this question to those who answer as self-identifying as autistic or questioning autistic, highlighted above)

- a. Social media platform(s)
 - b. Website(s)
 - c. Blog(s)
 - d. Counselor(s)
 - e. Psychologist(s) or Psychiatrist(s)
 - f. Family member(s)
 - g. Friend(s)
 - h. Pediatrician
 - i. Primary care provider(s)
 - j. None
 - k. Other (write in additional options)
5. Are you registered for CEA accommodations?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer not to answer
6. If yes, do any of your accommodations pertain specifically to accommodating your autistic traits/needs? (Note: the online survey flow will only show this question to those who answer as self-identifying as autistic or questioning autistic, highlighted above)
- a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer not to answer
7. Do you have any additional diagnoses or experiences that you believe impact your experience as an honors student? (Note: students that self-identify as allistic, or non-autistic will receive this exact question but without the word "additional" diagnoses)
- a. Open response
 - b. Prefer not to answer
8. What general college related experiences have you struggled with? Check all that apply.
- a. Applying to colleges
 - b. Applying to the Honors College
 - c. Getting involved on campus
 - d. Building relationships with my peers
 - e. Building relationships with professors
 - f. Staying organized
 - g. Meeting deadlines
 - h. Stress management
 - i. Communication with professors
 - j. Other (please list)
9. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Note: the online survey flow will only show this question to those who answer as self-identifying as autistic or questioning autistic, highlighted above)
- a. I believe my diagnosis will impede my ability to succeed in the Honors College.
 - b. I do not know what my diagnosis means for me moving forward in the honors process.

- c. I know of campus resources to seek assistance with my disability.
 - d. I feel confident in my ability to seek school accommodations.
10. Please describe honors processes you have struggled with during your time in college.
- a. Open response
11. From your current perspective, what honors related support would you have liked as a freshman?
- a. Open response
12. What you most like faculty mentors to know about the autistic experience navigating an honors thesis project? (Note: the online survey flow will only show this question to those who answer as self-identifying as autistic or questioning autistic, highlighted above. Allistic or non-autistic students will be shown the same question with general wording about honors research support)
- a. Open response
13. What types of resources would you most like to see to support you with honors-related processes (Workshops, blog posts, webpages, student or support groups, workbooks, etc.)
- a. Open response
14. What types of resources would you most like to see to support your experience as an autistic honors student? (Workshops, blog posts, webpages, student or support groups, workbooks, etc.) (note: the online survey flow will only show this question to those who answer as self-identifying as autistic or questioning autistic, highlighted above)
- a. Open response

Block 2 - Demographic Questions

15. What is your race?
- a. Insert current federal options for race
16. What is your ethnicity?
- a. Hispanic or Latino
 - b. Non-Hispanic or Latino
17. What biological sex were you assigned at birth?
- a. Assigned female at birth (AFAB)
 - b. Assigned male at birth (AMAB)
 - c. Prefer not to answer
18. What is your age?
- a. Open response
19. What is your gender identity?
- a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Non-Binary/Third Gender
 - d. Prefer not to answer
20. What is your college?
- a. Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences
 - b. Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design
 - c. J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

- d. Sam M. Walton College of Business
 - e. College of Education and Health Professions
 - f. College of Engineering
21. What is your major?
- a. Open response
22. If you would like to be considered for one \$75 gift card, please enter your name and UARK email below. After the randomized drawing is held the data column with your name and email will be deleted.
- a. Open response

Block 3 - Creative Resource Prompts

All previous survey questions will be reported as group statistics and will not be linked to any personally identifying information.

This portion of the survey will inform the development of digital blog posts highlighting the autistic honors student experience. (Note: the survey flow will only show this set of questions to those who answer as self-identifying as autistic or questioning autistic, highlighted above)

23. We would love to provide you with an opportunity to provide a quote about your experience navigating college as an autistic honors student. If there is anything you would like people to know about navigating college as an autistic honors student, please type in your response below. This quote may be shared anonymously or with a pseudonym of your choice, if you prefer.
- a. I consent to this statement being anonymously shared in any creative resources developed.
 - i. Yes, I would like to share my statement with no name included.
 - ii. Yes, I would like to share my statement with a pseudonym (alternative name).
 - a. Enter the pseudonym of your choice (open response)
 - iii. No, I prefer this statement not to be published in any way. If you choose this option, your statement will be kept confidential to the fullest extent allowed by law and University policy.
24. If you are willing to be contacted with any clarifying questions about your quote or experience shared in the above statement (not your survey answers) please write in your full name and UARK email. At the conclusion of the study, the data column with your name and email will be deleted.
- a. Open response

Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter



To: Isabel M Whitehead
From: Douglas J Adams, Chair
IRB Expedited Review
Date: 01/27/2023
Action: **Exemption Granted**
Action Date: 01/27/2023
Protocol #: 2212440993
Study Title: Assessing the Need for Autism Resources Among Honors Students at the University of Arkansas

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Lisa S Wood, Investigator
Vivian Ruth Brantley, Key Personnel

Appendix C

Tables

Table C1

Honors Resources by College

Resource	Honors College	Resource Present? Yes/No					
		FJAD Honors	AFLS Honors	COEHP Honors	ENGR Honors	ARSC Honors	WCOB Honors
Example Honors Theses	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	YES
Identifying an Honors Mentor	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO
Identifying Available Projects	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES

Table C2

Participants' Classification

Classification	Frequency			%
	Allistic n=25	Questioning Autistic n=5	Prefer not to Say n=2	
Junior	10	2	0	37.50
Senior	15	3	2	62.50
Total	25	5	2	100.00

Table C3*Participants' Self-Reported Neurotype*

Neurotype	Frequency n=33	%
Allistic – non autistic	24	72.73
Allistic – non autistic otherwise neurodivergent	2	6.06
Autistic – diagnosed by a professional	0	0.00
Autistic – self diagnosed	0	0.00
Awaiting autism assessment	1	3.03
Questioning autism – otherwise neurodivergent	2	6.06
Questioning autism – not otherwise neurodivergent	2	6.06
Prefer not to answer	2	6.06
Total	33	100.00

Table C4*Condensed Neurotype Categories*

Neurotype	Frequency n=33	%
Allistic – non autistic	26	78.78
Questioning autistic	5	15.15
Prefer not to answer	2	6.06
Total	33	100.00

Table C5*Participants' Age of Questioning ASD*

Age	Frequency	Percent
10*	1	100.00
Total	1	100.00

Table C6*Participants' Race*

Race	Frequency		%
	Allistic Students n=19	Questioning Autistic Students n=5	
White	19	5	100.00
Black or African American	0	0	
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0	
Asian	0	0	
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0	0	
Other (Please List)	0	0	
Total	19	5	100.00

Table C7*Participants' Ethnicity*

Ethnicity	Frequency		%
	Allistic Students n=19	Questioning Autistic Students n=5	
Hispanic or Latino	2	0	8.33
Non-Hispanic or Latino	17	5	91.67
Total	19	5	100.00

Table C8*Participants' Biological Sex*

Biological Sex	Frequency		%
	Allistic Students n=19	Questioning Autistic Students n=5	
Assigned Male at Birth (AMAB)	3	1	16.67
Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB)	16	4	83.33
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0.00
Total	19	5	100.00

Table C9*Participants' Gender Identity*

Gender Identity	Frequency		%
	Allistic Students n=19	Questioning Autistic Students n=5	
Male	3	1	16.67
Female	16	3	79.16
Non-Binary/Third Gender		1	4.17
Prefer not to answer	0	0	0.00
Total	19	5	100.00

Table C10***Participants' Age***

Age	Frequency		%
	Allistic Students n=19	Questioning Autistic Students n=5	
19	1	0	4.17
20	3	3	25.00
21	10	1	45.83
22	3	1	16.67
28	1	0	4.17
30	1	0	4.17
Total	19	5	100.00

Table C11***Participants' College***

College	Frequency		%
	Allistic Students n=19	Questioning Autistic Students n=5	
Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences	4	2	25.00
Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design	7	1	33.33
J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences	0	0	0.00
Sam M. Walton College of Business	0	0	0.00
College of Education and Health Professions	7	0	29.17
College of Engineering	1	2	12.50
Total	19	5	100.00

Table C12***Participants' Major***

Major	Frequency		%
	Allistic Students n=18	Questioning Autistic Students n=5	
Agricultural Business	1	0	
Animal Science	1	0	
Architecture	4	1	
Biological and Agricultural Engineering	0	2	
Childhood Education	1	0	
Environmental, Soil, Water Science	0	1	
Exercise Science	2	0	
Hospitality Management	1	1	
Human Nutrition and Dietetics	1	0	
Industrial Engineering	1	0	
Interior Architecture and Design	1	0	
Landscape Architecture	2	0	
Nursing	2	0	
Public Health	1	0	
Total	18	5	100.00

Table C13***Sources Questioning Autistic Students Reported Using for Initial Information About ASD***

Learning Platform (Check all that apply)	Frequency	Percent
Social media platform(s)	0	0.00
Website(s)	0	0.00
Blog(s)	0	0.00
Counselor(s)	0	0.00
Psychologist(s) or Psychiatrist(s)	0	0.00
Family member(s)	2	40.00
Friend(s)	2	40.00
K-12 school referral	0	0.00
Pediatrician	1	20.00
Primary care provider(s)	0	0.00
Other (write in additional options)	0	0.00
Total	5	100

Table C14***Sources Questioning Autistic Students Reported Using for Current Information about ASD***

Learning Platform (Check all that apply)	Frequency	Percent
Social media platform(s)	3	16.67
Website(s)	5	27.78
Blog(s)	1	5.56
Counselor(s)	2	11.11
Psychologist(s) or Psychiatrist(s)	2	11.11
Family member(s)	1	5.56
Friend(s)	2	11.11
K-12 school referral	0	0.00
Pediatrician	2	11.11
Primary care provider(s)	0	0.00
Other (write in additional options)	0	0.00
Total	18	100.00

Table C15*Participants' CEA Accommodation Status*

Classification	Frequency			%
	Allistic n=25	Questioning Autistic n=5	Prefer not to Say	
Yes	1	0	0	3.33
No	24	5	0	96.66
Total	25	5	0	100.00

Table C16*Questioning Autistic Students' Perceptions Toward Their Possible ASD Diagnosis*

Item	Mean n=5	SD
I believe my diagnosis will impede my ability to succeed in the Honors College.	2.20	1.17
I do not know what my diagnosis means for me moving forward in the honors process.	2.80	0.75
I know of campus resources to seek assistance with my disability.	3.20	1.72
I feel confident in my ability to seek school accommodations.	2.60	1.62

Table C17*Participants' General Challenges in College by Self-Reported Neurotype*

General Challenges (check all that apply)	Frequency	
	Allistic Students	Questioning Autistic Students
Applying to colleges	2	0
Applying to the Honors College	1	0
Getting involved on campus	6	3
Building relationships with my peers	6	4
Building relationships with professors	6	2
Staying organized	10	1
Meeting deadlines	5	2
Stress management	17	3
Communication with professors	4	3
Other (open response)	1	2
Total	58	20

Note. For other category, students mentioned: mental health, general health, lack of guidance, and additional workload outside of school

Table C18*Allistic and Questioning Autistic Participants' Preferred Honors College Resources*

Resource	Mean for Allistic Students n=19	Mean for Questioning Autistic Students n=5
Workshops	4.00	4.20
Blog Posts	4.53	3.00
Webpages	3.47	4.00
Student Organizations/Clubs	4.05	3.60
Workbooks	3.21	2.80
Social Media Posts	3.95	4.60

Appendix D

Blog Posts

Blog Post One

Researchers personal experience

My whole life I have been a straight A student and always gotten along really well with my teachers and other figures of authority. When placed among my peers I began to struggle. I always had a very hard time making friends and developing relationships with people my own age. Any time there was a group project I always dreaded it, and not because I would do all the work or because I did not like working with others. It was because I always felt like I was on a different frequency than my peers and I felt like the outcast in a group. I disliked and did not understand the rules they created amongst themselves but thrived under specific regulations like the ones you might find in a classroom. I was the odd one out every time.

I was sociable and easy to get along with. I was friendly with everyone, but no one was really ever my friend. Again, it wasn't that I didn't like people, or they didn't like me, it all just felt off.

I spent my grade school years like this and even cut off almost all communication with people I knew from high school and past when I came to the University. I thought a fresh start and new people is what I needed to feel like I belonged. A semester and I still felt like I was riding the wrong wavelength. I chalked it up to being younger and living off campus with my parents. I got involved best I could and was excited about my degree, but I still had a nagging sensation that at every event I was wearing a pattern when I was supposed to have on solid colors.

When I first really started looking at the honors thesis project, I was immediately overwhelmed. The thesis instructions are very vague and broad. This can be a very good thing as it allows creative freedom for students, but at the same time it terrified me as I saw no structure in the project. I was struggling to make social connections with other students and as a freshman I did not really know any faculty to ask for help. Looking back on it now, I know that I would have benefited from a semester-by-semester calendar with project timeline goals on it such as picking a topic and finding a mentor. It would have also been beneficial to meet professors who were available to be mentors and hear about current projects.

After struggling with school and life in general, I reached out to CAPS and started seeing a counselor. It took three different semesters of on and off counseling and three different counselors for me to question if I was in fact autistic. I honestly got the idea from the “put a finger down” challenges on TikTok. Once I realized that I related to many of the traits listed and joked about I started doing research. My parents told me I was “fine” and that there was “nothing wrong with me”. But I don't think of autism as something wrong with you or as a disability as it is designated. So, I kept reading and learning and finally built up the courage and a safe enough relationship with my counselor to say, “I think I might be autistic”. My counselor was very supportive and asked me why I thought this. We talked over several sessions, and she suggested I might benefit from getting tested for autism. She referred me to ARS. After a lot of paperwork and several weeks I had my answer.

I am autistic.

It was extremely validating. I was not “just being dramatic”, I was not crazy, I was not broken or weird. There was a reason I felt like I was wearing patterns when everyone else was in solids. There was a reason that I was on a different wavelength.

After my diagnosis I reached out to CAPS to see what accommodations I could get for school now that I knew more about how my brain worked. Unfortunately, there were no additional accommodations available to me that I did not already have access to for another diagnosis. But I had an answer and I had help.

I think it is really important to think about how your reaction to hearing a diagnosis or to someone questioning autism or being neurodivergent may make them feel. There is a lot of stigma and negative language attached to an autism diagnosis that can make it hard to be comfortable even though you are relieved. Something I still struggle with is “who is it safe to share this part of me with”. I know I have a reason behind my feelings which is a gigantic relief, but it is very isolating.

After a very brief high and feeling of success I fell into a depressive stage. My diagnosis did not fix all the ways I had been feeling. I know why I am the way I am but how does that help me now? Who can I tell? Who will judge me? What good does knowing I'm autistic do? Should I keep it a secret? Should I be proud of my diagnosis? Did my family see me differently? These were all questions running through my head and not all of them ended up having positive answers.

All this led to me deciding to focus my honors thesis on autism in higher education. My hope is to create resources for more people to be able to get the diagnoses they need. I want to make sure that other students do not feel alone and for them to know that having autism and other neurodivergent disorders is nothing to be ashamed of.

I encourage everyone who is questioning to read as much as you can. Do research. Take self-tests. Get tested by a professional. Talk to CAPS. Talk to your doctor. Talk to ARS.

There is no harm in getting tested. At the very least you will know more about yourself and how your mind works. And at worst nothing changed for you. It is also ok if you find you are not autistic.

Blog Post Two

Community and campus resources

There are many community and campus resources available to students while attending the University of Arkansas.

Campus resources include...

- The Center for Educational Access (CEA)
- Counseling And Psychological Services (CAPS)
- Pat Walker Health Center
- Autism support program

Community resources include...

- Arkansas Rehabilitation Services
- Your doctor
- The internet
- Social media

And this is all just to name a few!

CAMPUS RESOURCES

At CEA students can get accommodations for school with a letter from their doctor verifying

their autism diagnosis. This service can also be useful for other diagnoses relating to mental health such as anxiety and other neurodivergences such as ADHD.

CAPS provides many services to students such as individual and group counseling.

Counseling services can be useful to students who...

- Are questioning autism or other neurodivergences
- Just received a diagnosis and do not know how to move forward
- Are having a hard time adjusting to university life because of their neurodivergence

Psychiatry services can be useful to students who...

- Are seeking a diagnosis and would like to have a psychiatric evaluation and be referred out to other medical members of the community
- Already have a diagnosis and would like to establish medical care with Pat Walker Health Center

Pat Walker Health Center is a good location for students of all types to establish medical care while at the University of Arkansas. Pat Walker is a good starting point for students seeking a diagnosis to be referred to community members who perform testing.

For students who are entering the University of Arkansas that already have an autism diagnosis, the Autism Support Program can be a useful resource. There are some requirements to be a part of this program, but if accepted it can assist students with Academics, Independence, Social Skills, and Leadership Skills.

Your completed application package should include:

- U of A Autism Support Program Application Form

- Most recent IEP
- Two Recommendation Letters
- Neuropsychological Report stating all diagnose

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Arkansas Rehabilitation Services is a government program where individuals who qualify can get disability screenings, disability aid, financial assistance, and other such support. If you qualify you can get tested for autism or other neurodivergent disorders and gain a diagnosis and even assistance with moving forward in school and the workforce.

Your doctor is always a good resource to utilize when questioning or managing an autism diagnosis. This can be a physician here in Fayetteville, at pat walker, or wherever you call home.

One of the most important steps of discovering whether you have an autism diagnosis is to educate yourself.

- Know what it means to be autistic
- Know the signs
- Ask your family and friends of stories where your behavior aligned with the symptoms
- Know how your gender and age can impact presentation of autism

Be prepared to advocate for yourself in any resource you utilize when seeking an autism diagnosis! Social media and the Internet are amazing resources for students to utilize.

Information and community can be developed to help individuals move forward in their autism diagnosis journey.

All resources mentioned are linked below:

[Counseling & Psychological Services | Pat Walker Health Center | University of Arkansas \(uark.edu\)](#)

[Pat Walker Health Center - Homepage | Pat Walker Health Center | University of Arkansas \(uark.edu\)](#)

[Home | University of Arkansas \(uark.edu\)](#)

[Autism Support Program | Autism Support Program | University of Arkansas \(uark.edu\)](#)

[Rehabilitation Services – AR Division of Workforce Services \(arkansas.gov\)](#)

Blog Post 3

Recommendations for autistic honors students to navigate honors processes

It can be a daunting thing to look at the honors thesis project and think to yourself, “Where do I even start?”. Here are some good places to start.

- Look at the honors college website
- Introduce yourself to all the professors you meet
- Look at past examples on ScholarWorks
- Ask questions
- Keep a planner
- Dedicate a notebook or folder on your computer to everything thesis related
- Take a deep breath... you have 4 years
- Keep a calendar for scholarship, submission, and enrolment deadlines
- Initiate open communication with your committee and mentor

- Know that its ok to not know what you want to do at first
- Know that everyone goes at their own pace
- Keep an open mind
- Check out these resources
 - o [ScholarWorks@UARK](#)
 - [Undergraduate Honors Theses | Honors College | University of Arkansas, Fayetteville \(uark.edu\)](#)
 - o [Home | Honors College | University of Arkansas \(uark.edu\)](#)
 - [Honors Thesis | Honors College | University of Arkansas \(uark.edu\)](#)

Blog Post Four

Recommendations for faculty, based on participants' responses.

Dear Faculty,

Please **help** us!

We as students get **overwhelmed** by the honors thesis project.

We need extra **support**.

We need open **communication**.

We need **meet and greet** events to know who is available to be a **mentor**.

We need to know what **projects** are **currently taking place**.

We need to know what the **deliverables** of the thesis can be.

We need to have **guidance**.

We need all the **instructions** in one **clearly organized** location.

We need **patience**.

We need **understanding**.

We need you to know **we are trying**.

We need you to know that **our minds work differently** from person to person.

We need you to know **we want to succeed**.

We need you to know **we want to be here**.

We need you to **help us thrive**.

Sincerely,

Honors Students

Appendix E

Student Quotes

