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Transitioning out of a 4-year non-degree-seeking program for emerging adults
with neurodiversity

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Abstract

There are an increasing number of emerging adults with neurodiversity entering higher education. However, little is known about benefits and barriers to programs designed to aid in student success for neurodivergent emerging adults. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of neurodivergent emerging adults enrolled in a non-degree seeking 4-year program. Participants were recruited to complete an interview assessing their lived experiences, the benefits and barriers, and the transition out of the program and into adulthood. Important themes emerged including the importance of mentors and program staff, the role of identity/confidence, development of life and social skills, the changing relationships of families, and the impact of the program. An exploratory theme included the stigma associated with neurodiversity. These results are important given the prevalence of neurodiversity. Additionally, this study highlights how similar emerging adults with neurodiversity are to neurotypical emerging adults. They have similar aspirations and barriers during this developmental period. Future studies should continue to examine and refine programs like EMPOWER to support our neurodiverse young adults.

Introduction

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) approximately 19% of all undergraduate student's report having some form of a disability, including neurodiversity. The term neurodiversity refers to diversity in thinking, learning, and behavior (Baumer & Frueh, 2021). Individuals with neurodiversity engage and interact with the world around them in different ways and to some, these differences are seen as a deficit due to stigma around neurodiverse conditions. Examining these differences is particularly important when considering the transition from adolescence to adulthood, given that this is a time of exploration and identity development and movement to independent living (Arnett, 2000); However, research has found that individuals with neurodiverse conditions are less likely to live independently and achieve economic independence when compared to their non-neurodiverse peers (Morris, 1999; Wagner et al, 2005). Thus, focusing on the contexts that support emerging adults with neurodiversity is increasingly important.

Across the United States there has a large push for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) awareness. This is particularly notable across college campuses. However, DEI initiatives seldom focus on neurodiversity. Because there have been significant advances in diagnosis, awareness, and accessibility, an increasing number of emerging adults with neurodiverse conditions are attending postsecondary institutions (White et al., 2016). Recently, articles have called for recognizing neurodiversity as a DEI issue and advocate for universal training on neurodiversity across campuses for faculty, staff, and students (Dwyer, 2022). In addition to trainings, it has been recommended to have supports that ensure a smooth transition into and out of any postsecondary training (Meaux et al., 2012). This includes providing support in a variety of contexts including the community, peers, family life, and work.

Historically, individuals with neurodiverse conditions were socially isolated and excluded from engaging in the community. In the 1900s, neurodiverse individuals were often institutionalized and involuntarily sterilized because of the belief that any form of neurodiverse condition was synonymous with poverty, sloth, crime, and sexual profligacy (Wehmeyer, 2012). It wasn't until the 1960s, at the peak of the institutionalization, that President Kennedy launched a panel to investigate community-based support systems for neurodiverse individuals stating, "We as a nation have for too long postponed an intensive search for solutions to the problems of the mentally retarded. That failure should be corrected" (Kennedy, 1962). This paved the way for initiatives like Education for All Handicapped Children Act (now IDEA) and The Americans with Disabilities Act.

Today, a new support model has been developed that supports and demands the presence and inclusion of individuals with neurodiverse conditions in the community and its structures (Wehmeyer & Bolding, 1999). Despite progress, emerging adults with neurodiversity experience challenges due to the stigma, a lack of awareness, and lack of appropriate infrastructure that can lead to exclusion of people with neurodevelopmental differences (Baumer & Frueh, 2021). Moreover, Cuadra (2021) specified at least 20% of the adult population is neurodiverse, yet 80% of those who are neurodiverse are unemployed likely due to a lack of programming, access, and the stigma associated with neurodiversity. Stigma around neurodiversity is present across the lifespan but may be particularly impactful during the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood since this is a period of increased identity exploration (Arnett, 2000). Thus, the purpose of the present study is to examine the barriers and supports emerging adults with neurodiversity have in the contexts of living, work, family, and community as they transition through a non-degree seeking postsecondary program.

Literature Review

Neurodevelopmental Disorders

The *DSM-5* classifies neurodevelopmental disorders as “a group of conditions with onset in the developmental period, including deficits that produce impairments of functioning” (Morris-Rosendahl et al., 2020). These conditions are made up of intellectual disabilities (ID), communication disorders, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), neurodevelopmental motor disorders that include tic disorders, and specific learning disorders. The prevalence of these disorders has a high comorbidity rate, meaning that an individual often presents with more than one neurodevelopmental disorder. In a study conducted to assess the trends in the occurrence of developmental disabilities in children between 1997 and 2008, it was found that males have a higher prevalence in general for specific neurodevelopmental disabilities when compared to females (Boyle et al., 2011). Studies have also found that various mutations are associated with neurodevelopmental disorders such as chromosomal rearrangements, small indels, point mutations, and copy number mutations (Parenti et al., 2020).

As of 2020, less than 3% of children worldwide are affected by a neurodevelopmental disorder (Parenti et al., 2020). Research in the United States indicates that about 2% of college students report being autistic and about 5% report Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Pryor et al., 2012). Recent work has highlighted the need for supports for neurodivergent college students and have made a number of recommendations including creating programs designed to assist emerging adults with neurodiversity (Dwyer et al., 2022). In 2008, the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) provided access to financial aid to individuals with neurodiversity that attend a college that provide transitional programs, meaning students

with neurodiversity should be integrated socially and academically in the college setting through comprehensive transitional programs. Today, there are 265 non-degree programs on college campuses that offer students with neurodiversity the opportunity to attend college, take classes, and prepare for independent living (Idriss, 2021). However, emerging adults with autism are less likely than individuals from the general population to attend college in non-degree or degree seeking programs (Dwyer et al., 2022). Thus, it is important to understand the transitional period surrounding programs designed to help emerging adults with neurodiversity independent living.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

The most recent version Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th edition (DSM-5 TR) classifies Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a neurodevelopmental disorder that is “characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and social interactions across multiple contexts, including deficits in social reciprocity, nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction, and skills in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), ASD has a prevalence of 2.2% within the United States’ population (CDC, 2022). When diagnosing an individual with ASD, a clinician will look for specifiers, which are specific characteristics about the manifestation and presence of a disorder that further classify it, in order to provide an individualized diagnosis (Regier et al., 2013). When the DSM was updated to the DSM-5 in 2013, a major change was made in which it groups several neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism, Asperger’s, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specific, under one diagnostic category, now called ASD (Moran, 2013). This was done because many of these

neurodevelopmental disorders had the same hallmark features: “deficits in social communication and social interaction” and “restrictive and repetitive behavior patterns” (APA, 2022).

The DSM-5 TR explains that the neurodevelopmental disorders are often comorbid with each other, meaning that an individual will most often have more than one neurodevelopmental disorder (APA, 2022). According to the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, ASD has many comorbid mental and physical health conditions that are important to be aware of, including “epilepsy/seizures, sleep disorders/disturbances, ADHD, gastrointestinal disorders, feeding/eating challenges, obesity, anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder” (Bennett, 2017). There is sufficient evidence to show that medical comorbidities have greater prevalence in those with ASD, and because of these medical comorbidities, no two individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders will have the same experience.

Intellectual Disabilities.

According to the Special Olympics website, the term intellectual disability is used to describe individuals who have limitation in intellectual functioning and certain important adaptive behaviors (Special Olympics, n.d.). Intellectual functioning includes the abilities to learn, problem solve, and make judgements, and adaptive functioning is the ability to complete the daily demands of life, specifically looking at the areas of conceptual skills, social skills, and practical skills (Schaepper et al., 2021). The American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) explains the criteria an individual must meet in order to be diagnosed as having an intellectual disability: having an IQ below 70-75, having significant limitations in two or more adaptive areas, and the condition must manifest itself before age 22 (AAIDD, n.d.).

Some examples of the conditions included under the category of “intellectual disability” include down syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, genetic conditions, fragile X syndrome. Intellectual disability can result from many different things, like genetic syndromes, illnesses, head trauma, exposure to toxins, maternal issues in utero, and even brain malformation. Each of these conditions are known to hinder an individual’s intellectual and adaptive functioning; however, the specific effects of these conditions might appear differently depending on the condition and the individual (APA, 2021). According to the American Psychiatric Association (2021), intellectual disabilities affect around 1% of the population.

The Importance of the Transition to Adulthood

Moving from adolescence to adulthood is a significant developmental transition that has been well-structured for most until the mid-20th century, but has recently shifted to being unstructured (Schwartz et al., 2015). Meaning that, there were clear paths to postsecondary education, marriage, and parenthood. Today, many factors contribute to this lack of structure, including delayed age at marriage and parenthood (Arnett, 2000). Instead of early adulthood being a time of settling down and commitment, it has evolved into a time that is full of exploration and frequent change, which has made the late teens to early twenties a distinct developmental period in the lifespan (Arnett, 2000). This developmental period, called emerging adulthood, is different from both adolescence and adulthood because during this time, people have independence from normal social roles and expectations, and may choose many different directions for their life to take (Arnett, 2000). It is important to note that during this transitional time, around ages 18-21 years, young adults should be making career choices and learning the skills needed to begin working toward their chosen career path (Levinson & Palmer, 2005).

Of the many paths emerging adults may choose for their lives, one direction many choose to take is pursuing a college education. Between 1959 and 2010 college attendance in the United States rose by 430% (Schwartz et al., 2015). Approximately one third of emerging adults attend college right after completing high school and one third of those who complete a bachelor's degree decide to go on to obtain a graduate level degree (Arnett, 2000). This striking increase in the number of emerging adults pursuing a college education can be based on our changing social structure and the fact that many areas of employment now require workers to have a college degree (Schwartz et al., 2015).

Identity exploration becomes more distinct in emerging adulthood. Erik Erikson has proposed the theory of psychosocial development in which identity development is crucial for the transition from adolescence into adulthood (Waterman, 1982). In order to form their identity, emerging adults explore different paths in life while gradually laying an outline for their adult life (Arnett, 2000). Identity exploration focuses on domains such as love, work, and worldviews and mainly takes place during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). To have long term success, emerging adults need to be confident and firm in their identity development (Waterman, 1982). The ages between 18 to 25 generally mark the time period when individuals begin to transition away from their family home to a more independent life, and is a period of time marked by physical, environmental, social and/or emotional changes (Schulenberg et al., 2004).

Although many studies focus on transitioning from a dependent to independent situations after completing school and during the emerging adulthood, people with neurodiversity can transition to independent living at various periods (e.g., school years, young adulthood, later adulthood) (Trainor et al., 2019). Whether one is able to transition to independent living is highly dependent on skills learned earlier in life. For example, researchers conducted in-depth

interviews with youth or young adults with disabilities living independently in an effort to understand the factors that most affected their transitions (Hendey & Pascall, 2001). Themes illustrating successful transitions included financial assistance, parental support and expectations, positive thinking, quality schools that provided support, choice on personal assistance, owning a home, paid work, and perceived ability to successfully be employed and care for one's own health (Hamdani et al., 2015; Pascall & Hendey, 2004). Participants further expressed the desire to live with as little help as possible while simultaneously acknowledging that living without any help at all may not be possible and therefore it was acceptable that one may need some help (Hamdani et al., 2015). Additionally, a number of these themes reflect guidelines and recommendations provided by neurodiversity advocacy groups, which advise people who are planning to transition to independent living to prepare for such potential issues as transportation, self-care skills, personal safety, employment, financial literacy, and recreation and leisure (Center for Parent Information & Resources, 2017; National Community Living Resource Center, n.d.; Project 10: Transition Education Network, n.d.; Talent Knows No Limits, n.d.).

More recently, Mazzotti et al. (2016) conducted a systematic review to extend the literature on predictors of post-school success for independent living and participation. The results supported previously identified predictors of success such as learning self-care, social, and independent living skills; receiving a diploma; or gaining valuable work experience. This review also identified new predictors of successful transition including parental expectations (e.g., expectations that their child will attain such goals as having a job, attending postsecondary education, and being self-supporting), goal setting, and the ability to independently go where one needs or wants to go (Mazzotti et al., 2016). Overall, more research is needed to better understand the lived experiences of young adults with neurodiversity who have transitioned

successfully to a college program to provide actionable recommendations for individuals, families, services, and programs. Furthermore, there is a continued need to examine the personalized definitions of IL and explore factors within the individual that can be utilized to support a successful transition to IL. Additionally, there is a paucity of research to understand the viewpoint of people with neurodiversity as they may perceive a life transition that entails an event other than completing school.

Transitional Contexts

As adults, individuals with intellectual disabilities often experience difficulties with within many transitional contexts, and must develop skills to promote autonomy and independence within the contexts of living arrangements, employment, relationships, and their community. Each of these contexts provides unique challenges for individuals with neurodiversity. These include independent living, work and career, family, and community.

Independent Living. For most of their lives, individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities have lived with their families or caregivers. This means that they have always had someone to support them in their daily tasks, keep them on schedule, and provide assistance when needed. With the arrival of adulthood, though, these individuals must navigate the transition from dependent living to independent living. According to a study by Clouder and colleagues (2020), independent living “involves having a choice and control over where, and with whom, one lives in such a way that one can engage in the community’s social, economic, and cultural life.” This study furthers on in explaining that independent living means one has a choice and control over their own life, even if they can’t do everything on their own. When compared with peers living without disabilities, individuals with neurodevelopmental disabilities are much less likely to live independently, which is why there are many interventions and

programs in development or in place that are aimed at promoting autonomy and helping individuals develop independent living skills. Some independent living skills that all individuals must learn include self-advocacy, self-determination, social skills, financial assistance, caring for one's own health, and personal safety (Schulz et al., 2022). These skills will not only enhance an individual's ability to live independently, but also set them up for future success as they enter into the adult world. While studies have examined the transition to independent living in emerging adults with neurodiversity, these studies only examine one context. It is important to examine multiple contexts to gain a better understanding of the supports needed since these contexts overlap. For example, having a job assists in financial preparedness for independent living.

Work and Career. For most adults, working is a central component in their lives, as it provides them with the support and community that is needed to work towards having a successful life. Recent studies show that many people are actually underprepared for entering the workforce, and as a result of this they end up feeling dissatisfied with their career decisions. This could be a result of how modern U.S. education systems prepare their students for this transitional time. Currently, most high schools in the U.S. focus on college preparation more than workforce readiness and career preparation. This focus overlooks the fact that receiving a postsecondary education is not always the right decision, or even an option, for many students (Levinson & Palmer, 2005). The U.S. Department of Labor (1991) states that nearly half of students in the U.S. graduate high school without having proper career preparation. It can be inferred that if this large portion of American students lack the proper career planning, then many students with neurodiversity will also be missing this preparation and planning for their future.

When preparing students with diverse abilities for this transition to adulthood, it is important to consider their strengths and weaknesses, as well as develop important skills to help them stand out from other applicants. In comparison to peers who are not neurodiversity, students with neurodiversity are actually more likely to experience issues like “unemployment or underemployment, lower pay, and job dissatisfaction” when they enter the workforce (Dunn, 1996). It is because of this that it is even more important to have a plan in place for individuals with neurodiversity before the transition period so that they will be on track to achieve future successes in their vocational pursuits. According to an article by Levinson and Palmer (2005), this planning process includes assessing a student’s strengths and weaknesses in key areas of career readiness, as well as keeping school personnel, community agencies, family members/guardians, and the student involved as active planners. This article explains that schools (specifically high schools) should be actively involved in helping these students prepare for their future careers by setting goals, developing important job and life skills, and gathering experience within the work field (i.e., internships, shadowing, volunteer work) (Levinson & Palmer, 2005). Having others working along with the individual and their family/caregivers in this process will provide a strong support group that can advocate for the student and help prepare them as they plan and begin the transition into the workforce and independent life.

Family. For the family, the time of transition from adolescence to adulthood requires many adjustments, including in parental and caregiving roles, the allowance of autonomy and independence, and the roles and relationships of siblings (Arnett, 2000). With all of these adjustments, though, this time of transition can become a time of high-stress within the family unit if not handled correctly, as it requires much adaptation and patience from all members of the family (Hallum, 1995).

As an individual with neurodiversity matures, the responsibilities and burden of care increases for parents and caregivers. Depending on the individual's neurodiverse condition, they could have social lags that prevent them from being able to interact with their peers in a positive and productive manner, resulting in low social interaction and not having many close peers. The individual also grows with age, meaning there will be a higher physical demand for care by parents, likely including responsibilities like bathing, physical guidance on activities, and even lifting depending on the individual's needs. This greater physical requirement could make it difficult for parents, especially when/if their child grows larger than they are, as they might not be able to keep up with these physical demands. Another important change that occurs is the onset of puberty that comes with adolescence and adulthood, including menstruation and the emergence and exploration of sexuality. For parents and caregivers, this means that roles of caregiving that had previously been carried out might have to be renegotiated as these changes emerge (Hallum, 1995). Hallum (1995) also presented the example of fathers assisting their daughters while using the restroom; Fathers might have difficulties or reservations when encountering menstruation, so they might renegotiate that role with a mother or other caregiver who can effectively take care of that specific situation.

Siblings of individuals with neurodiversity also likely have increased responsibilities when it comes to roles in the family and caregiving, as well as their relationship with their neurodiverse sibling. Sometimes, siblings must help with some of the caregiving tasks that the sibling with the neurodiversity requires, depending on the specific situation. This results in a greater expectation and requirement from the sibling. Siblings also have to work harder, in some cases, to build that social connection with their brother/sister because many disabilities hinder an individual's social skills and responsiveness. This can have a positive effect on both the disabled

and non-disabled children because it promotes social development and helps each individual learn to communicate with others. Often times, parents must give more attention to their child that has a disability, which could result in strained parent-child relationships with their non-disabled children. Recent research shows, though, that when parents have a positive attitude and make time to support and engage with each child, the parent-child relationship is not strained (Hallum, 1995). As their disabled sibling matures, roles of the non-disabled sibling(s), like social and caregiving, will shift and adapt to the needs of their sibling and their family.

“For some families, the transitional years from adolescence to adulthood are cited as difficult, especially if a child does not become successfully independent when expected” (Hallum, 1995). In a perfect situation, “the child will develop the social and living skills to live independently from the parents,” but at what point in life this happens is unique to each individual (Hallum, 1995). Often, young adults with disabilities do not leave home until long after their counterparts without disabilities. This means that the parents will have to continue providing care physically, emotionally, and financially until their child is able to live independently or seek out other options like group living or hiring a caregiver for their child. Additionally, parents would need to “redefine their expectations for their own futures,” as these futures will be dependent upon when and if the child is able to live independently, and how the parents decide to navigate this transition (Hallum, 1995). It is important, though, that families continue to provide socioemotional and financial support as these neurodiverse individuals mature because it “enhances their morale, reduces loneliness and anxiety, [prevents them from] feeling incapacitated...offers longer life expectancy, and reduces institutionalization” (Heller & Schindler, 2009).

Community. According to Lehman and colleagues (2002), the domains of community and social involvement are “essential to successful and satisfying adult living” (Lehman et al., 2002). This domain, though, is one that many individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions struggle with because the disorders that fall under this category, as previously mentioned, cause individuals to have varying degrees of deficits in social skills. Because of these social difficulties, individuals with neurodiversity are at risk for difficulties in the other domains, including social relationships, independent living, education, and career development (Meyers et al., 2015). The ability of neurodivergent individuals to engage in positive community and social interactions is dependent upon their preparation and previous work in developing social interaction skills. There is a varying degree of social deficits in neurodivergent individuals, so some might catch on and get involved easily, but others might require guidance and help with communication and getting involved in their community.

Some specific challenges that individuals might have in the social and community involvement domain as they transition to adulthood include social skills, independence and autonomy levels, and lack of connections within their community (United Disabilities Services, 2021). Additionally, individuals who have disabilities “are often excluded from social relationships, community participation, leisure activities, and employment” due to many factors like accessibility, environmental expectations, and even the severity of their disabilities (United Disabilities Services, 2021). Through recent policies and actions like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, legislation has been put into place to promote inclusivity and equal access within communities, as well as enact programs to help individuals with diverse abilities become engaged in their communities, have positive

socioemotional development, and receive training and preparation for the transition to adulthood (Lehman et al., 2002). Through programs and involvement as laid out by legislation, individuals can learn the skills and practices needed to become competent and involved members in social and community situations and gain the independence that transitioning to adulthood requires.

EMPOWER

EMPOWER (Educate, Motivate, Prepare, Opportunity, Workplace readiness, Employment, Responsibility) is a post-secondary program at the University of Arkansas for individuals with mild intellectual disabilities. This program offers a 4-year, non-degree college experience program for students with neurodiversity that incorporates functional academics, independent living, employment, social/leisure skills, and health/wellness skills in a public university setting with the goal of producing self-sufficient young adults. Though it is non-degree-seeking, the program is designed to give students a general certificate of completion. The EMPOWER program emphasizes workplace experience, community integration, and independent living with transitionally reduced supports. The EMPOWER program's curriculum utilizes a personal planning model designed to meet the needs, interests, and skills level of their young adults. Vocational goals are a factor when determining students' plan of study as they participate in an on-campus or local internship and also have the opportunity to take classes that will relate to their career decision. Additionally, students work directly with peer mentors and supervisors to reach educational, occupational, and personal goals throughout their time in the program. Students are able to receive an accommodated and inclusive college experience through the EMPOWER program, while also preparing for the transition to postschool adulthood and independent living (University of Arkansas EMPOWER, 2022).

Present Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the contexts and supports surrounding the transition to in and out of emerging adulthood for individuals with neurodiversity that are participating in a 4-year non-degree seeking program. The program incorporates functional academics, independent living, employment, social/leisure skills, and health/wellness skills in a public university setting with the goal of producing self-sufficient young adults. This study seeks to interview emerging adults with neurodiversity and their parents to gain a better understanding of the developmental contexts and supports available using a qualitative approach. Specifically, the exploratory questions include:

- a. What are the lived experiences of emerging adults with neurodiverse conditions as they transition in and out of a non-degree seeking program?
- b. What are the supports and barriers to developing skills in different contexts to support emerging adults with neurodiversity in independence?
- c. To what degree is a program designed to prepare students for transition to adulthood effective in completing its goals?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data for this study will be collected from students in the EMPOWER program at the University of Arkansas. Before recruiting participants from the EMPOWER program, IRB, parent, and program director approval will be obtained. Inclusion criteria for students in the EMPOWER program will include being aged eighteen to twenty-four with “mild cognitive disabilities who do not demonstrate significant behavioral or emotional problems” (EMPOWER, n.d.). All participants involved with this study will be voluntary participants. The study will be

advertised face-to-face to individuals in the EMPOWER program through EMPOWER staff members and program directors.

Once students indicate interest in participating, they are signed up for a time to conduct the interviewer with the trained study author in a quiet room on campus. The consent form will be read to the student to ensure they can ask questions and understand the process. If the student agrees to participate, a semi-structured interview will be conducted. The interview questions will be developed by the study author and reviewed by the EMPOWER program staff to ensure appropriateness. Interviews will be conducted in-person and audio recorded, and should last about 30-50 minutes. Each interview will be transcribed verbatim, omitting identifiable information (e.g., participant name). Interviewers will check the transcripts for errors and inaudible sections before proceeding with analysis.

Measures

EMPOWER Students

Demographic Questions. EMPOWER participants self-reported their *age* (calculated by date of birth), *gender* (1=female; 0=male), and *race/ethnicity*. Race/ethnicity was coded into each of the following categories: Caucasian/White, African American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian American, and Other.

In-Person Interview. Participants will take part in an in-person, one-time interview. The interview will consist of 10 open-ended questions regarding their experience in the EMPOWER program. Each interview will be audio-recorded and last approximately 30-40 minutes each to ensure the full attention of the participants. Sample items include: “What is a typical day like for you in the EMPOWER program” and “what support do you have for independent living?”. The data will be descriptively coded and compiled to understand themes.

Plan of Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a method used “for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2019, p. 6). The study author transcribed audio recordings from each in-person interview. Transcriptions were then reviewed and compared to audio recording to ensure original audio was correctly transcribed. Transcripts were then analyzed using inductive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clark (2006), which is an efficient and appropriate methodology for in-person interviews and focus group analysis to discover findings from each set. In initiating analysis, study author and another researcher conducted *chunk* coding, meaning transcripts were read and then discussed to discover the implicit, initial patterns to form general classifications of the topics discussed to be coded (Ferrari, Tweed, Rummens, Skinner & McVey, 2009). Then following the initial coding, codes were reviewed and discussed to determine dominant themes, and then categorized meticulously to reflect the perceptions of the participants in relation to their experiences with EMPOWER. Thematically descriptive quotes were utilized to demonstrate final themes, emphasizing findings across the in-person interviews (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Results

Overall, 11 emerging adults participated in the interviews. There are currently 23 students in the EMPOWER program, thus this study had a response rate of 48%. About half (45%) reported being female, and 99% reported being Caucasian, and were, on average, 21.36 years old ($SD = 1.21$). Three participants were freshman, 3 were sophomores, 1 was a junior, and 4 were seniors. Conditions represented by the sample population included Autism, Down Syndrome, and other various intellectual disabilities. However, many emerging adults with neurodiversity have comorbid conditions, such as autism along with ADHD. Some of the

students in the study were representative of this comorbidity. Out of the 11 students who participated in the study, 7 already work jobs or hold internships, and of that 7, 5 students were juniors and seniors. Students in the EMPOWER program responded to questions about their lived experiences in the EMPOWER program, the supports and barriers experienced, and the preparation for the transition to adulthood following the leaving the EMPOWER program.

Lived Experiences in the EMPOWER Program

Emerging adults with neurodiversity reported what their typical day was like in the EMPOWER program. All participants mentioned meeting with their mentors as a typical day, typically in conjunction with the number of mentors and the time they are with them. All but 1 participant mentioned going to classes at various points in the day. Two brought up internships and another two discussed going to work as a typical part of their day. For example, one participant stated “in college, so typically they get up. I'll go to class and then I'll go to my internship. Then I have about an hour and a half to kill before my next class, and then after that I meet with a mentor from about 4-5 o'clock. So that's kind of a typical day now”. Another participant stated, “so, my schedule is kinda hectic. On Mondays, I wake up at around 6-6:30am and I work at the barn. And I internship there as well from 8:30-9:45 and then I go to class. And then after class I come back to the barn around 1:00 pm and stay there till my next class. On Wednesdays I have two mentors. And on Fridays, I have a mentor. On Sundays, too”. These quotes demonstrate the various activities these young adults are engaged in and how important mentors, classes, and work/internships are an important part of their days.

Supports and Barriers

Overall, participants reported several support systems within the program. The top of Table 1 shows the supports those emerging adults with neurodiversity reported. In terms of

support, the two biggest supports participants reported were the mentors and the EMPOWER staff reported by 45% of the participants. One senior stated, “obviously, Ashley, Amanda, and Devin, my parents, my brother who is actually finishing up law school this year, so he will not be up here next year”. Family and friends were also cited as support systems by 27% and 18% of the participants, respectively. One interviewee said, “And then friends that I have all over the place, friends here, they all support”. A few students (18%) said that academic support was important to their success in EMPOWER. Specifically, “I get academic support to, like, help on my assignments and stuff”. Only one individual reported instructors or coworkers as support systems. These results highlight the importance of the social support provided by mentors and the EMPOWER staff in student success.

Surprisingly, the biggest barriers participants reported were their own personal characteristics, which 45% of the emerging adults reported experiencing. For example, “I was thinking [that they think I] still have the mentality of a child. I don’t know if, I don’t know if they actually think that, yeah, sometimes it comes across that way” and “I like second guess myself, yeah and, even like when it comes to the program too. A big thing is like sometimes I just like things could be very stressful”. Another summed up the obstacles with one word, “confidence”. These quotes are similar to typical developing emerging adults and demonstrate the importance of continued identity development and efficacy building. Other reported barriers are similar to emerging adults in a college setting, including procrastination or time management (27%), scheduling (18%), and motivation (18%). In the words of one participant, “Motivation for me is a low point and so I’ll work on that by getting back into the habit.” One EMPOWER student stated, “I procrastinate a lot and just trying to keep that study habit especially”. Finally, one individual reported stress and surprise assignments as barrier for their success.

Table 1. The Perceived Supports and Barriers to the EMPOWER Program.

| Supports | Number of Comments |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Mentors | 5 |
| EMPOWER Staff | 5 |
| Family | 3 |
| Friends | 2 |
| Academic Support | 2 |
| Instructors | 1 |
| Coworkers | 1 |
| Barriers | Number of Comments |
| Personal Characteristics | 5 |
| Time Management/Procrastination | 3 |
| Studying | 2 |
| Scheduling | 2 |
| Motivation | 2 |
| Stress | 1 |
| Surprise Quizzes | 1 |

Life after EMPOWER

Participants were asked about what they planned to do following the EMPOWER program and also what their ideal life would be like. Emerging adults with neurodiversity (100%) had plans for what they would like their life to look like after graduating from the EMPOWER program. Specifically, most (90%) cited wanting to work in various careers including in a hospital as a nurse and child life specialist, football coaching, and opening their own business. Some participants (36%) referenced moving home or being out on their own. Many of their responses were practical in that they were similar to what typical emerging adults have reported. Although not all students reported an ideal life (54%) that they envisioned, they had a vision of what life would look like and dreams of what they could do, as shown in Table 2. This included being a science fiction writer, traveling, being a Special Olympics world champion, and getting married and having children. One mentioned, “living their best life”.

Table 2. Planned and Ideal Lives Following EMPOWER

| Participant | Planned Life | Ideal Life ^a |
|-------------|---|--|
| 1 | “I want to work in the healthcare field, so I want to work at children. I’m going to be a child life specialist, which is for children who are in the hospital and you like, go around and you like provide stuff for them, like coloring books or like things for them to do. And you can do, like, medical play, therapeutic play.” | -- |
| 2 | “When I graduate from the EMPOWER program at the University of Arkansas, I’m looking forward to looking into the future. Probably joining Special Olympics as one of their athletes” | “A Special Olympics world champion. This is my biggest dream” |
| 3 | “I’ll probably try to get a job and I don’t know, find a career or a hobby in my hometown.” | “Getting a job as a writer, finishing a machine [robotics]. Like doing something that’s creative, like writing books. Sci-fi or fantasy” |
| 4 | “I may want to try to get a job at the college maybe. Like try to get a job like at a hotel or work in a bank or something like that.” | “My goal, my goal after I graduate EMPOWER program is to see what life is like and hopefully, I’ll make that job at the college.” |
| 5 | “I’m going to open a business. Nutrition place.” | “Me and my girlfriend want a dog and children”. |
| 6 | “I’m hoping to get an apartment and be on my own and going to medical school.” | “Life is for anything you wish. I would be working as a nurse in Seattle. Seattle, I just always thought it was interesting. And I would have a little puppy dog. And I would have my best friend with” Participant also indicated wanting to get married and have children through non-verbal cues. |
| 7 | “Yeah, I’m graduating. Also, a dream come true at the same time. Yeah, I’m very excited, but very nervous for what the end looks like. I am actually staying here after graduation.” | “I’m looking forward to making money. Mm-hmm. And also kind of like adulting learning how to budget more and like. I can imagine it would be me working at a vet clinic. Me working out of that clinic living my best life. Living in an apartment, or a house I really want to buy.” “I also I want to settle in Texas, so I see myself living in Texas, buying the land, living in a house” |
| 8 | “I’m not sure, probably move back with my parents.” | -- |
| 9 | “Like the front desk, maybe.” | -- |
| 10 | “We will be back in Texas and coaching at a high school level for football. Other than that, I have no clue so…” | “Getting out to Southern California a lot more, especially go see my ranch where I am a brand fan. So that would be fun getting to honestly just getting to try to go and. Kind of all over Texas and stuff just kind of go to some places that I haven’t been before in Texas. So, like Austin and San Antonio, that’s probably gonna be like a big summer thing, so.” |
| 11 | “Back home again. Job.” | -- |

Note. ^aDashes indicate that the participant did not answer the question.

Contexts of Development

To address the second research question examining contexts of development in supporting the transition to independence for emerging adults with neurodiversity, participants were asked questions about work, family, and friends/peers. Responses were organized by domains and examined for any possible subthemes. Under the category of work, subthemes include type of experiences and work, and work anxiety. Within the domain of family, improved family relationships, autonomy and independence, and changing relationships were identified as subthemes.

Work

Under the theme of work, there were several subthemes that emerged, including the types of work experiences discussed, job expectations versus dreams, and work anxiety.

Types of work experiences. During the interviews, there were two different types of work experiences that presented themselves. Students discussed internships and paid job positions. Of the 11 students interviewed, 7 were currently working either a paid job or an internship position. The remaining 4 students stated that they had plans to begin looking for internships and jobs in the coming years.

Probable work vs. Ideal job. One thing that emerged when the students were asked about their concrete plans versus their dream life plans was the types of jobs they would hold. Table 2 above addresses some key statements and sheds light on the differences between what these students desire to do with their life, versus their expectations about what jobs they feel they can work.

Work anxiety. The participants didn't actively express that they had work anxiety, but within the context of conversations, and when asked questions about what they are worried about after leaving the EMPOWER program, students expressed that they were worried about what

comes next for them. 4 students stated that they had fears about graduation and what the future will look like, one student stating "I think I'm just more nervous about what it's going to look like...it's just going to be different and a big adjustment." Another student touched on how it is hard to find the work-life balance, explaining "it is hard to balance because like you're not just balancing your job, you're balancing school and everything."

Family

Under the theme of family, subthemes of improved family relationships, autonomy and independence, and changing relationships were identified.

Improved family relationships. Overall, the majority of the participants (81.8%) feel that their relationship with their parents has improved since beginning the EMPOWER program. One student felt that their relationship with their family is "way better," explaining that "they, my parents, my family, and friends keep supporting me and my [parent is] giving me the advice of studying." This quote, along with other statements, highlights that, along with their parental/familial relationships improving, these students feel like their families are more supportive of them since beginning the EMPOWER program. The students were asked if their relationships with their siblings had changed since beginning college. Of the 6 students this question was applicable for, all students felt that their relationships with their siblings had changed. The general concurrence was that these relationships had changed for the better and felt that they had gotten closer to their siblings. One student explained that even though there was more distance between them and their sibling, they still talk, and the student feels that they are growing closer.

Autonomy and Independence. When the participants were asked if they felt that they had more independence and freedom since beginning the EMPOWER program, 100% of the

students felt that they did have more autonomy and independence when compared to their life before the EMPOWER program and college. One student stated “I have a lot more freedom to kind of do whatever,” and another student elaborated “I think even like just me adulting, I feel like I’ve just gotten a lot closer with them. My Mom and Dad are like the biggest supporters ever. They’re really excited to see what’s next for me.” These quotes demonstrate that these students do feel that they are developing autonomy and gaining a sense of independence and feel that their families are supporting them as they transition into adulthood.

Changing Relationships. When the participants were asked if they felt their relationships with their family would change after graduating and leaving the EMPOWER program, the results were mixed. Seven students responded to this question; 3 students felt that this relationship would not change, but 4 students felt that their relationship would improve more. Because they feel that they are gaining more independence, 2 students felt that they would be treated more as equals and like adults by their parents, rather than solely as their child. One student commented that they feel that their parents “won’t be as much of a parent” once the student graduates and transitions into adulthood.

Benefits and Impact of the EMPOWER Program

To address the last aim to address how well the program prepares students to transition to adulthood, participants were asked about the skills they have developed and their preparation for leaving the program. Social skills, life skills, and the impact of the EMPOWER program were all brought up.

Social Skills. All 11 participants stated that they do feel their social skills had improved since beginning the program. A senior in the program stated “I feel like I am more confident. Coming here, I was shy, and now I am not a shy person at all.” Overall, it was evident that

students felt more confident in their social skills. Some consistent themes found in what social skills had improved included communication skills, active listening skills, and overall talking skills. 3 students stated that their communication had improved, 3 students felt that they were better listeners, and 4 felt that they had gotten better at talking in general. 2 students also felt that they had gotten better at paying attention during times of social interactions. A sophomore explained that their social skills have improved because of their interactions with friends, stating “I learn from them. Always pay attention when communicating with each other.”

Life Skills. Of the 11 students interviewed, 6 commented that they felt their life skills had improved. Some students mentioned that they are able to cook for themselves, have learned to live independently, and are better able to take care of themselves since starting the EMPOWER program. Additionally, a first-year student mentioned that they are continually learning new life skills through the program.

Program Impact. At the end of each of the interviews, the participants were asked if they wished to share anything about what the EMPOWER program means to them or about how the EMPOWER program has impacted their lives. 4 out of the 11 students shared that the EMPOWER program has positively impacted their lives. A senior stated “My experience with EMPOWER—I will never forget it. It has helped me grow as a person and helped me become me where I am now. I will be forever grateful and thankful for EMPOWER.” A freshman explained that “the EMPOWER program has changed [their] life and has given [them] a place to go to college.”

Transition Out of EMPOWER

As students prepare to transition out of the EMPOWER program and graduation nears, they each feel that there are important things that can help them be better prepared to make this

transition. Of the 11 participants, only 6 responded to this question; 2 students felt that there wasn't anything or anything more that they need to help prepare them for the transition into adulthood, stating that "the EMPOWER program has really kind of helped me getting ready to make this transition." The other 4 students shared similar opinions on what they needed to best feel prepared to transition. The responses revealed that these students felt that there needs to be more planning in place for life beyond college and the EMPOWER program (i.e. finding a job, planning out living arrangements, etc.). One student stated that "starting ahead of time and preparing" would help them as they get ready to graduate and felt that they "would like somebody to just walk [them] through what happens after college so that [they] can just be prepared and not just go on into the craziness." In the context of the questions discussing worries about life post-EMPOWER and the challenges in EMPOWER, some students expressed worry about graduation, so it would also be good for these students to have some graduation preparation and time to discuss graduation to help alleviate these concerns.

The Stigma of Neurodiversity

Although this study did not specifically ask about bias or stigma surrounding neurodiversity and being a part of the EMPOWER program, some participants spontaneously brought it up. One student recounted feeling stigma from a family member, explaining "I was abused by my [family member], who has no respect for people like me. But my mom actually got on to her tell [them] not to do that ever again, and [they] took her advice. [They] apologized and ever since I am now in college, [they] have changed. [They are], like, more nicer than ever."

When participants were asked if they felt they had made friends since beginning college, one student recounted their experiences of stigma around being a part of the EMPOWER program: "when I tell people like I am in the empower program, they don't wanna be my friend."

Another student expressed that they felt that even some of their mentors showed bias, expressing “Me thinking about mentors, and them thinking that I still have the mentality of a child. I don't know if they actually think that, but yeah, sometimes it comes across that way.” Though the majority of the students expressed that they have made friends, some students did express comments similar to this one, which demonstrates the stigma around being a neurodiverse student on a college campus.

Another prime example of ways that the EMPOWER students felt the stigma of being a neurodiverse student on campus is through the ways their academics are managed. As an EMPOWER student, they are qualified as non-degree-seeking students, and receive a certificate of program completion on graduation day for the school. One student expressed just how hard they had to work to overcome the non-degree-seeking status so they might pursue a degree, recalling “I'm a non-degree, but degree seeking student, which typically in EMPOWER program we're not allowed to get credit which is, I don't know, it's different, so I have to, like, fight for my credit and stuff...Last year, so I had to like, you know, go to a Community College, things like that, and transfer my credits over.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of emerging adults with neurodiversity as they transition into and out of a 4-year non degree seeking program. Overall, results were positive with emerging adults with neurodiversity reporting strong supports within the program and their families, and reported a positive impact from the program. Students shared both personal and educational challenges that they face in their daily lives, as well as how they have felt that EMPOWER has impacted these challenges. Given the push for DEI in educational settings, this study is unique in examining the impact of a program such as EMPOWER.

Although EMPOWER students discussed the numerous supports they have within the program, they also commented on experiencing some stigma associated with their neurodiversity.

One important concept gathered from study results is that the students need more support in planning and preparation during their time in the EMPOWER program so that they can feel fully ready to make the transition into adulthood once they graduate. Several students expressed anxieties about what life would look like for them, stating that they are worried about losing their support system, uncertain about what the future will look like, and they are nervous about graduation. They mentioned the need for stronger career training and preparation using a career coach.

Another important concept that came to light through the interviews and the students' responses was that each of the students had big ambitions about what they wanted to do for their lives, but seemed to limit themselves. When the students were asked what their perfect life would look like, they responded by explaining that they wanted to open businesses, become Special Olympics grand champions, and even work full time at a veterinary clinic; however, when they were asked what they were going to do after they graduated, they responded with statements like "I will probably stock shelves in a grocery store," or other responses that were far from what they had envisioned their perfect life looking like. These responses tell us that these students seem to be limiting themselves to what they will do for careers, and it demonstrates that more needs to be done within these students' time in the EMPOWER program to help set them on paths toward their dreams in life. Though it is important to help these students understand that sometimes they must work toward that goal, it is also important that these students have equal opportunities—just like their peers—to pursue their dreams and goals.

Although it was not directly addressed in the questions asked of the participants, there was a lack of discussion on how instructors and professors existed as a support system. Only one participant mentioned that they felt their instructors supported them in their educational goals. This likely stems from educators having a lack of sufficient training and understanding of neurodiversity within the educational system. Educational institutions should see this as an opportunity to provide more in-depth training geared toward a variety of DEI issues—including neurodiversity—for not just their educators, but for the entire institution. This will combat stigma, bias, and discrimination on college campuses across the country.

Additionally, this study overall is significant because it provides insight to what college life is like for students with neurodiversity, how a program like the EMPOWER program can scaffold these students, and the ways in which educational institutions around the world should be working towards inclusive educational opportunities for all students. As there is currently a push for DEI advancements across the country, it is important that colleges use research studies like this one to continue to refine or create programming aimed at emerging adults with neurodiversity. Educational institutions need to recognize neurodiversity as a DEI issue and put structures, programs, and interventions in place to help support these students in their pursuit of higher education.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study is limited in that it examines a new program and a program not available on all college campuses and may not be generalizable to all young adults with neurodiversity. Specifically, this is a specialized program that was implemented a few years ago and is only seeing their first few cohorts finish now. This study is also limited in that the participants' levels of communication skills varied and ranged from low levels of communication skills to proficient

in communicating. This posed a challenge when transcribing the recordings, as well as when trying to understand and interpret what students said and what they meant. Additionally, this impacted the analyzation of the data, as some words and quotes were difficult to interpret.

Future research should examine how sharing the results of this study with the participants and the EMPOWER program will foster change and opportunities for constructive discussions. Through this future research, programs like the EMPOWER program can understand how to better support their students and set them on track for successful transitions into adulthood. It will also provide opportunities for students with neurodiversity currently in the EMPOWER program to have conversations with the EMPOWER staff about what can be done to create the changes that these students wish to see.

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EMPOWER Student Consent Form
EMPOWER Transitions for Emerging Adults
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Principal Researcher: Ashlyn Walker & Jennifer Becnel, PhD

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating the supports and barriers during the move into and out of the EMPOWER program. Specifically, we are interested in your personal experiences as they relate to living arrangements, potential work, family, and the community. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are between the ages of 18 and 24 years old and enrolled in the EMPOWER program at the University of Arkansas. Please take time to review the following form, ask questions, and decide whether you wish to participate or not.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who are the Principal Researchers?

This study is being conducted by Ashlyn Walker and Jennifer Becnel, PhD of the School of Human Environmental Sciences at the University of Arkansas. Ashlyn Walker can be reached by phone at 501-230-6263 or by email at akw028@uark.edu. Dr. Becnel can be reached by phone at 479-575-2358 or by email at becnel@uark.edu.

What is the purpose of this research study?

This study is interested in the students' perceptions of the supports and barriers in transitioning in to and out of the EMPOWER program.

Who will participate in this study?

This study will include 15 emerging adults from the EMPOWER program. To participate, you must be the ages of 18-24 and enrolled in the EMPOWER program at the University of Arkansas.

What am I being asked to do?

Participation in this study will last between 30 and 45 minutes. You will be asked questions by the principal investigator, Ashlyn, who will audio record your answers.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions in the online questionnaire. If you feel any discomfort, you can omit an answer to a question or terminate your involvement in the study. You will not be penalized for omitting answers or terminating the questionnaires early.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

There are no benefits to participating in the study.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?

Yes. You have the option of being entered into the drawing for a \$50 Walmart gift card.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. Your standing and relationship with the University of Arkansas will not be affected in any way if you refuse to participate or drop out of the study.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law. Participants in this study will be assigned an ID number to ensure confidentiality. Interviews will be audio recorded and stored on a secured server that only the primary researchers have access to. All audio recordings will be destroyed after they are transcribed. All data will be stored on a secure server only accessible by the primary researchers.

Will I know the results of the study?

At the conclusion of the study, you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the Principal Researcher, Ashlyn Walker at akw028@uark.edu or Jennifer Becnel at becnel@uark.edu or 479.575.2358. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?

You have the right to contact the researchers listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Ashlyn Walker

Candidate for Bachelor of Sciences in Human Development and Family Sciences

University of Arkansas Fayetteville, AR 72701

501.230.6263

Akw028@uark.edu

Jennifer Becnel, PhD

Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Sciences

Human Environmental Sciences

HOEC 118

University of Arkansas Fayetteville, AR 72701

479.575.2358

Becnel@uark.edu

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Integrity and Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker,

CIP Institutional Review Board Coordinator Research Integrity and Compliance

University of Arkansas

105 MLKG Building Fayetteville, AR 72701

479-575-2208

irb@uark.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B
EMPOWER Student Interview Script

Demographic Questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What gender do you identify with? (male, female, other)
3. What is your race/ethnicity?

Interview Questions:

1. What is a day like for you with the EMPOWER program?
2. What are the biggest supports in your success to the program?
3. What are the biggest obstacles (things you need to overcome) in the program?
4. What do you think your life will look like after you leave EMPOWER?
5. Living: Do you plan to live alone (or with a non-family roommate) or move back into your house with your family once you leave EMPOWER? If living alone, how has EMPOWER helped you feel prepared for this?
6. What are the top 3 things that you are looking forward to after leaving EMPOWER and the university?
7. What are the top 3 things you are worried about after leaving EMPOWER and the university?
8. How has your relationship with your family changed since you started the program? Do you get along better or worse? How so?
9. Do you find that you have more freedom now or when you lived at home? How so?
10. Do your relationships with your brothers and sisters changed at all?

11. How do you expect your relationships with your family to change after you leave EMPOWER?
12. Do you feel that you have made many friends through the EMPOWER program?
13. Have your friendships changed since EMPOWER? Do you expect they will change once you leave the EMPOWER?
14. Do you feel that your social skills (talking, listening, etc.) or life skills have improved during your time with EMPOWER? How?
15. Work (different questions depending on age group)
 - a. Freshman/Sophomore: Have you started looking for work or volunteer opportunities? What do you plan to do after you leave the EMPOWER program?
 - b. Junior/Senior: Do you have any work plans for after you leave EMPOWER? Are you working somewhere now?
16. If you could imagine the perfect post-EMPOWER life, what would that look like?
17. Is there anything that you think could help you to transition out of EMPOWER?
18. Is there anything else you wish to share?