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Exploring Career Readiness Among Youths With Disabilities

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Abstract

Guided by the Social Cognitive Career Theory, this study aimed to further explore factors associated with career readiness among U.S. college students with disabilities. Through an online survey, students with disabilities were assessed with the Career Futures Inventory–Revised (CFI-R), a 28-item assessment tool that evaluates various aspects of career adaptability, such as positive attitudes toward career planning. Internships and career conversations are effective strategies for fostering career readiness. Our findings implied that certain subgroups of students with disabilities may face unique challenges in their academic journey. Given the high unemployment rate among college graduates with disabilities and our findings, we recommend that education institutions proactively reach out to offer targeted support services.

Keywords

college students, disability, career readiness, career exploration, accommodation

According to National Association of Colleges and Employers (2019), career readiness refers to the knowledge, skills, and attributes that an individual needs to succeed in their chosen career, encompassing a range of competencies, including technical or academic skills, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, adaptability, and professionalism. This concept is essential for individuals seeking to achieve their professional goals and for employers seeking to build a skilled and productive workforce.

By prioritizing career readiness, young adults can increase their employability, make informed career decisions, and effectively adapt to the evolving demands of the job market (Rottinghaus et al., 2005). Therefore, career readiness helps bridge the gap between academic knowledge and practical skills, empowering students to transition smoothly into their desired careers and succeed in their professional lives (Lent & Brown, 1996). However, data indicate a disparity in employment rates between students with and without disabilities. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2023) reported that 28.5% of college graduates with disabilities were employed in 2018, compared to 75.5% of nondisabled graduates. These statistics highlight significant challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. Therefore, this study was undertaken to explore potential factors associated with career readiness among young adults with disabilities.

Challenges Faced by Students With Disabilities

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018), 19% of undergraduate and 12% of graduate students reported having a disability in the 2015–2016 academic year. In this study, it was found that students' veteran status and higher age were correlated to higher rates of reported disability. Compared to students without disabilities, students with disabilities report more anxiety and academic-related distress (Davis, 2020). They also exhibit higher rates of suicide ideation, suicide attempts, and nonsuicidal self-injury, which significantly diminishes their sense of belonging within the university community (Coduti et al., 2016). In addition, students with disabilities face higher instances of discrimination on campus (S. A. Smith et al., 2021).

This likely explains why a notable proportion of students with disabilities (63%) choose not to disclose their disability to their college, making them ineligible for necessary support and accommodation. Even when students do disclose their disability, this report reveals that a significant number of them still do not receive the required accommodations: Only 85% of students at four-year colleges and 57% of students at 2-year schools received accommodations despite reporting their disability. In a survey conducted by Mental Health America found that 70% of college students with mental health disabilities did not

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register for accommodations from their school (Davis, 2020). Reasons cited for this included not believing they were sufficiently unwell (41%), lacking awareness of available accommodations (33%), and feeling apprehensive about discussing accommodations with faculty (26%).

Even though the percentage of people with disabilities earning a bachelor's degree has doubled between 2008 and 2021, they still experience significant challenges compared to their nondisabled peers. About half (49.5%) of students with disabilities who enrolled at a 4-year college managed to complete a bachelor's degree within 6 years, whereas the figure for students without disabilities stands at around 68% (NCES, 2020).

Career Readiness of Individuals With Disabilities

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) emphasizes the role of social influences, self-efficacy, and outcome expectations in career development (A. Smith & Milson, 2011). This theory suggests that individuals with disabilities may face unique challenges, including negative attitudes and discrimination from others, which can result in lower self-efficacy (Appling et al., 2022). However, SCCT also suggests that individuals with disabilities can develop strong self-efficacy beliefs through experiences of mastery and support from others. Despite many adversities, they can use positive outcome expectations to guide their career choices (Dutta et al., 2015).

According to the BLS (2023), individuals with disabilities experience an unemployment rate roughly double that of individuals without disabilities (7.6% vs. 3.5%). Although the unemployment rate for people with disabilities drops with higher levels of education, those with disabilities who hold bachelor's degrees still face higher unemployment rates compared to their nondisabled counterparts. Therefore, The BLS report revealed that people with disabilities who are employed are more likely to be self-employed (9.5% vs. 6.1%) and are also almost twice as likely to work part time (30% vs. 16%).

Existing literature suggests that various factors can influence career readiness among college students with disabilities. For instance, students who possess a strong sense of self-awareness, understanding their strengths, limitations, and accommodation needs, are better equipped to navigate their career paths (Appling et al., 2022). Such individuals can effectively communicate their needs, advocate for themselves, and seek appropriate accommodations in the workplace (S. A. Smith & Milson, 2011).

Lombardi and colleagues (2018) employed latent variable modeling to empirically test a six-domain framework of college and career readiness (CCR), in addition to specific factor (Transition Knowledge). The study revealed that adolescents with disabilities had lower overall CCR scores and displayed less transition knowledge. Another national study conducted by Lombardi and associates (2022) documented disparities in schoolwide CCR supports for those with disabilities, particularly for students of color with disabilities. Furthermore, the study found that students of color without disabilities from low-income households were twice as likely to receive certain CCR support. In contrast, students with disabilities showed different patterns than their nondisabled counterparts, highlighting a clear disadvantage accessing CCR supports across all study outcomes.

To significantly enhance the career readiness among students with disabilities, comprehensive career counseling services tailored to their specific needs are essential (O'Shea et al., 2021). Career counselors can provide guidance on choosing suitable career paths, understanding job market trends, identifying potential barriers, and developing strategies to overcome them. Access to disability-specific support services, such as disability resource centers, peer mentoring programs, and academic accommodations, is critical for college students with disabilities (Kowalsky & Fresko, 2002). These services can address academic challenges, provide emotional support, and facilitate a smooth transition from college to the workforce.

Simultaneously, creating a college environment that prioritizes accessibility and inclusivity plays a crucial role in fostering career readiness among students with disabilities (Campanile et al., 2022). This includes aspects such as physical accessibility, availability of assistive technology accessibility, inclusive policies, and supportive faculty and staff who are knowledgeable about disability-related issues (Kim & Lee, 2016; Kwon et al., 2023).

A systematic review conducted by Monahan and colleagues (2020) revealed a limited number of empirical studies exploring career readiness frameworks for students with disabilities, with a strong emphasis on academic outcomes only. Considering that career readiness encompasses various dimensions, this study sought to delve deeper into the factors influencing career readiness among students with disabilities. Specifically, we aimed to answer the following research questions: What factors are linked to career readiness among college students with disabilities? Currently, there is a dearth of rigorous empirical research focusing on career readiness among the study population. Building on previous studies, our hypothesis posits that self-efficacy, social support, and outcome expectations contribute to career readiness. However, there may be additional factors to consider, such as disability-specific support, academic accommodations, and university policies aimed at fostering accessibility and inclusion.

Method

Participants

This research was conducted at a public university located in the Southeastern region of the United States, with a student population exceeding 35,000 individuals. The research

team collaborated with Disability Services, the campus office responsible for supporting and engaging with students with disabilities. To ensure the sample included appropriate participants, our sampling strategy required that all participants had been diagnosed with at least one disability by a legitimate professional. Prior to the study, we obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board at the university.

Mass email invitation was sent out to over 1,000 students who were registered with Disability Services. Study participants were asked to respond to the online survey, which typically took approximately 10 to 20 minutes to complete. Initially, 281 responses were collected via Qualtrics, indicating approximately 28% response rate.

The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. Among the students with disabilities in the study, more than half were identified as White (56.3%), heterosexual (59.7%), and women (57.6%). The sample consisted of participants from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, with 11.8% identifying as African descent and 12.2% as Latinx descent. In addition, 9.7% reported being multiracial. The study included a range of gender expressions and sexual orientations, with 13.4% identifying as nonbinary and 14.3% as bisexual. The average age of the participants was 22.8 ($SD = 6.3$). The majority of participants were pursuing undergraduate degrees, with 27.3% working toward a BA and 43.7% toward a BS degree.

The study identified two prominent types of disabilities among the participants: attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD, 46.6%) and psychological disabilities (40.8%). In addition, respondents reported various medical conditions (22.7%), such as Crohn's disease, Lyme disease, and irritable bowel syndrome. The study also identified different types of neurodivergent conditions, including learning disabilities (19.7%) and autism spectrum disorders (ASD, 16.4%). The proportion of participants with physical disabilities as well as sensory impairments, specifically related to vision and hearing, was relatively low.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Survey Participants.

Participants	*n*	%
Ethnicity		
African American/Black	28	11.8
Asian/Pacific Islander	8	3.4
Biracial/multiracial	23	9.7
Hispanic/Latinx/a/o	29	12.2
Native American Indigenous	2	0.8
White	134	56.3
Others	4	1.7
Gender		
Man	50	21.0
Woman	137	57.6
Genderqueer/Nonbinary	32	13.4
Transgender	1	0.4
Rather not to say	8	3.4
Sexual Orientation		
Asexual	17	7.1
Bisexual	34	14.3
Gay	1	0.4
Heterosexual	142	59.7
Lesbian	11	4.6
Queer	13	5.5
Other	9	3.8
Degree Program		
BA	65	27.3
BS	104	43.7
MA	19	8.0
MS	19	8.0
PhD	8	3.4
Other	12	5.0
Years in Program		
Freshman	35	14.7
Sophomore	35	14.7
Junior	57	23.9
Senior	68	28.6
Graduate Program	29	12.2
Alumni	3	1.3
Disability Type		
ADHD	111	46.6
Autism	39	16.4
Hearing	13	5.5
Learning disability	47	19.7
Medical	54	22.7
Mobility impairment	14	5.9
Psychological	97	40.8
Physical	17	7.1
Traumatic brain injury	11	4.6
Vision	19	8.0
Temporary	5	2.1
Other	22	9.2
	M	*SD*
Age	22.88	6.275

Measures

Career Readiness. The career readiness was measured using the Career Futures Inventory–Revised (CFI-R, Rottinghaus et al., 2012), a 28-item assessment tool that evaluates various aspects of career adaptability, such as positive attitudes toward career planning, overall expectations regarding outcomes, and specific components. For this sample, we adapted four distinct dimensions: (a) Career Agency, (b) Negative Career Outlook, (c) Occupational Awareness, and (d) Support.

The Career Agency (CA) subscale is a 10-item assessment designed to measure an individual's perceived ability to engage in self-reflection and plan ahead to actively initiate, regulate, and navigate career transitions. This newly added CA construct offers an important perspective on respondents' perception of their influence on their own career development process, encompassing elements such as control, confidence, optimism, and self-awareness

(Rottinghaus et al., 2012). Negative Career Outlook (NCO) is a measure consisting of four items that assess negative thoughts regarding career decisions and the belief that one will not attain positive outcomes in their career. Occupational Awareness (OA) comprises six questions aimed at evaluating an individual's perception of their understanding of the job market and current employment trends, incorporating changes in technology, general economic trends, and career exploration behaviors. The Support dimension, consisting of four items, measures the perceived emotional and practical support received from family and friends in pursuit of career goals.

The CFI-R scale (Rottinghaus et al., 2012) has emerged as a widely recognized instrument for assessing career adaptability, evidenced by its citation count of 238 since its publication. Previous studies have demonstrated the structural and convergent validity of CFI-R by correlating with several career-related constructs, including vocational identity, career decision self-efficacy, and career decision difficulties (Creed & Hood, 2015; Rottinghaus et al., 2012, 2017). Moreover, its applicability extends globally, with adaptation into the Turkish language (Hamedoğlu et al., 2014). While CFI-R has not been specifically tested with individuals with disabilities, it has been effectively used with diverse populations such as technical and vocational students (Ebenehi et al., 2016) and veterans (Gaiter, 2015). In addition, Park et al. (2019) conducted an investigation of measurement invariance between college students and confirmed its differential validity across these distinct groups. More recently, Almaawali and Al-Fazari (2023) evaluated the psychometric properties of CFI-R among undergraduate students in Oman. Their study demonstrated content and construct validity, as well as reliable internal consistency (higher than .70) measured by Cronbach's alpha reliability. The widespread adoption and validation of CFI-R in various contexts and populations supports its robustness as a tool for assessing career readiness.

Major Study Variables. Because there are no established scales or indexes to measure the support and resources facilitating a successful transition to employment among students with disabilities, we sought guidance from a range of professionals, including Disability Services, Career Centers, and Legal Offices. Our initial consultation involved two specialists affiliated with a university career center, renowned for their development of a mentoring program tailored for students with disabilities. The subsequent consultation featured two advocates hailing from a reputable nonprofit agency dedicated to advancing the employment opportunities of individuals with disabilities. Drawing from their insights, we identified potential variables that could enhance career readiness. The primary variables in our study encompassed: (a) students' satisfaction with university facilities, (b) their confidence in undertaking activities that foster career readiness, and (c) demographic information.

On a 5-point Likert-type scale, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with (a) housing, (b) transportation accessibility, (c) academic accommodation, (d) access to university facilities, (e) instructional technology, (f) financial assistance, (g) paid work, (h) health services, and (i) recreation or leisure activities.

Students' confidence in various activities was examined if there was a significant relationship with career readiness. These activities included (a) writing a resume and cover letter tailored to their discipline, (b) exploring career options using various tools, (c) navigating LinkedIn or other social networking sites, (d) practicing interviewing, (e) conducting a career conversation with someone who has their ideal job, (f) participating in internships related their discipline, (g) attending career fairs and/or networking events, and (h) presenting themselves professionally (e.g., attire, hair, and hygiene).

The analysis encompassed various demographic variables, including race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, degree program, years in program, and disability status. Participants were given the option to indicate all relevant disability types that applied to them.

Data Analysis

This study used multiple linear regression to examine factors related to students' career readiness. Prior to conducting our analyses, variables were screened for assumptions (e.g., normality and outliers). Each dimension of career readiness was explored separately using multiple linear regression as they represent distinct areas within career readiness. To accomplish the research purposes, a stepwise procedure was employed for exploratory purposes. Variables found to be statistically significant were sequentially added to the model until all significant variables were entered.

For each regression model, an adjusted R^2 was examined to determine the level of effect size. R^2 represents the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that is accounted for by the independent variables in the regression model. The adjusted R^2 is often used as an estimate of R^2 for populations, rather than samples.

To ensure an adequate sample size and achieve a power of .8, a power analysis was performed. Previous research using the Career Futures Inventory (CFI; Burnik & Košir, 2017) indicated the effect sizes ranging from .057 (for Support) to .852 (for Career Agency), indicating varying effect sizes depending on the specific factor being considered. These values collectively suggested a small effect (Cohen's d of .057

for Support) to a large effect (*d* of .852 for Career Agency, .579 for Negative Career Outlook, and .777 for Occupational Awareness). To take a more conservative stance in determining an adequate sample size, the Cohen's *d* value of .1 was used. Assuming approximately five indicators in the model, the estimated total number of participants required was 134, as determined by G*Power 3.1.9.7.

Missing data were handled by deleting cases with missing responses on more than half of the survey. The initial dataset consisted of 281 participants, including 26 cases who exited the survey immediately after submitting a consent form. After data cleaning, a total of 238 responses were identified and used for data analysis.

Results

Satisfaction and Confidence

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics for the additional independent variables analyzed in the study. The respondents expressed a notable level of satisfaction with the diverse range of services and programs available both on and off campus. These encompassed academic accommodation and instructional technology, among others. However, areas related to paid work ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 1.01$) and financial assistance ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.19$) exhibited comparatively lower levels of satisfaction.

Respondents expressed their confidence levels in several career exploration activities, including resume writing, career fairs, and internships. The highest level of confidence was observed in their ability to present themselves professionally ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.84$). Conversely, the lowest confidence was noted in their proficiency to explore diverse career options ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 1.35$).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables.

Variables	*M*	*SD*
Satisfaction with		
Housing	3.91	1.01
Transportation access	3.98	1.03
Academic accommodation	3.99	0.97
Access to campus facilities	4.09	0.82
Instructional technology	3.95	0.88
Financial assistance	3.46	1.19
Paid work	3.35	1.01
Health services	3.77	0.99
Recreation/ leisure activities	3.90	0.91
Confidence in		
Write a resume	3.55	1.18
Explore career options	2.99	1.35
Navigate social networking sites	3.54	1.22
Practice interviewing	3.29	1.22
Career conversation	3.51	1.20
Internship	3.73	1.17
Career fair	3.55	1.15
Present professionally	4.48	0.84

Factors Impacting Career Readiness

As described earlier, the career readiness encompassed domains of (a) Career Agency, (b) Negative Career Outlook, (c) Occupational Awareness, and (d) Support. Table 3 presented results for these four outcome variables, including the unstandardized regression coefficients (B), the standard error (*SE*), the standardized regression coefficients, associated *p*-value, $_{R}2$, and adjusted R^2 of the final model.

Following the stepwise regression analysis, the final model of Career Agency was statistically significant, with eight independent variables found to be significantly related, $F(8, 188) = 28.766$, $p < .001$. This model showed the adjusted R^2 value of .531, which is moderate to strong effect size. The strongest predictor of Career Agency was students' confidence in participating in internship. Higher confidence in participating in internships was positively related to perceived career agency ($B = .140$, $p < .001$). In addition, students' confidence in having a career conversation with a person who has their ideal job ($B = .111$, $p = .001$) and writing a resume and curriculum vitae ($B = .104$, $p < .001$) were found to be the predictors of career agency. Next, satisfaction with current housing ($B = .106$, $p = .002$) and accessibility to university facilities ($B = .107$, $p = .010$) were positively related to students' perceived ability to manage their career agency. Finally, students with psychological disability were less likely to be capable in managing their career agency ($B = -.190$, $p = .003$) whereas woman were more capable in doing so ($B = .135$, $p = .035$).

Ratings on items pertaining to Negative Career Outcomes were reverse-coded, with higher ratings indicating more positive perceptions about their future careers. The final model included four predictors: (a) confidence in participating in internship, (b) psychological disability, (c) learning disability, and (d) confidence in exploring career options. The model was statistically significant, $F(4, 192) = 15.330$, $p < .001$. The final model had a weak to moderate effect size with the adjusted R^2 of .226.

Confidence in participating in internship was associated with a more positive outlook on future career prospects ($B = .246$, $p < .001$). In addition, students with psychological disabilities had negative expectations for future career opportunities ($B = -.281$, $p = .008$). Conversely, students with learning disabilities tended to maintain a positive outlook ($B = .371$, $p = .005$). Moreover, higher confidence with exploring career options was related to a more positive career outlook ($B = .140$, $p = .010$).

The model for Occupational Awareness contained six predictors and was statistically significant, $F(6, 188) = 24.418$,

Table 3. Regression Analysis Results for Career Agency, Negative Career Outlook, Occupational Awareness, and Support.

Career agency	*B*	*SE*	β	*p*
Confidence: Participate in internship	.140	.034	.256	<.001***
Satisfaction: Current housing	.106	.034	.172	.002**
Confidence: Conduct a career conversation with someone who has your ideal job	.111	.033	.212	.001**
Satisfaction: Access to university facilities	.107	.041	.138	.010*
Confidence: Write a resume and CV	.104	.031	.191	<.001***
Psychological Disability	-.190	.062	-.150	.003**
Satisfaction: Transportation accessibility	.080	.035	.128	.024*
Woman	.135	.064	.106	.035*

Note. R^2=.550, adjusted R^2=.531.
* significant at .05, ** significant at .01, *** significant at .001 or lower.

Negative career outlook	*B*	*SE*	β	*p*
Confidence: Participate in internship	.246	.046	.343	<.001***
Psychological Disability	-.281	.106	-.169	.008**
Learning Disability	.371	.129	.182	.005**
Confidence: Explore career options	.140	.040	.168	.010*

Note. R^2=.242, adjusted R^2 =.226.

Occupational awareness	*B*	*SE*	β	*p*
Confidence: Navigate LinkedIn or social networking sites	.269	.041	.397	<.001***
Heterosexual	.305	.098	.182	.002**
Confidence: Conduct a career conversation with someone who has your ideal job	.152	.042	.222	<.001***
Man	.358	.115	.180	.002**
Age	.017	.007	.133	.018*
Autism	-.279	.128	-.124	.030*

Note. R^2 =.438, adjusted R^2 =.420.

Support	*B*	*SE*	β	*p*
Confidence: Participate in internship	.086	.047	.136	.067
Satisfaction: Recreation or leisure activities	.174	.053	.213	.001**
Confidence: Conduct a career conversation with someone who has your ideal job	.099	.045	.161	.030*
Satisfaction: Academic accommodation	.148	.048	.195	.002**
Confidence: Present yourself professionally	.132	.057	.149	.021*
Medical disability	.282	.101	.147	.014*
Heterosexual	.182	.087	.122	.038*

Note. R^2 =.377, adjusted R^2 =.354.

p <.001, with a moderate effect size of adjusted R^2 =.420. The level of occupational awareness was found to be higher among three demographic groups: (a) heterosexual individuals, (b) man, and (c) older students. On the other hand, students with ASD tended to have lower occupational awareness (B = -.279, p = .030). In addition, students with high confidence in navigating LinkedIn or social media and having a job-related conversation with a person in their desired job were significantly related to Occupational Awareness.

The model for Support domain was significant with the adjusted R^2 value of .354 (moderate effect size), F(7, 189)

= 16.343, $p < .001$. The seven significant predictors included (a) confidence in participating in internship, (b) satisfaction with recreation or leisure activities, (c) confidence in conducting a career conversation with someone who has their ideal job, (d) satisfaction with academic accommodation, (e) confidence in presenting themselves professionally, (f) students with medical disability, and (g) heterosexual individuals. Given that the independent variables were entered based on a default setting of the stepwise method within IBM SPSS—the entering criteria (.05) and removal criteria (.10), the first variable "confidence in participating in internship" was retained in the final model despite its marginal significance (.067). Students who felt confident in participating in internship ($B = .086$, p=.067), engaging in a career conversation ($B = .099$, $p = .030$), or presenting themselves professionally ($B = .132$, $p = .021$) tended to have a strong support system for career exploration. Similarly, students who were satisfied with their recreation or leisure activities or academic accommodation offered by their university found themselves to have better support for their job-seeking process. In terms of demographics, heterosexual individuals and those with chronic medical conditions tended to establish a strong support system for job seeking.

Discussion

Given the high unemployment rate and career disparities among college graduates with disabilities, this exploratory study was undertaken to uncover factors related to various dimensions of career readiness. Exploring career options via internship and career conversation appeared to be the best strategy to develop career readiness. To this end, it is crucial to create an environment that encourages students with disabilities to take ownership of their career decisions and supports them in making informed choices based on their values, interests, and long-term goals.

Furthermore, developing skills in utilizing instructional technologies can empower students to embrace change, foster flexibility, and adaptability, enabling them to navigate and thrive in dynamic work environments in the 21st century. Not surprisingly, students with confidence in exploring career options through various tools for social networking tended to have increased occupational awareness. Learners with disabilities can benefit from workshops that introduce various tools for career exploration, supported by the university (e.g., O*NET, PathwayU, Career Communities, Big Interview, and LinkedIn). Incentives can be created to encourage students with disabilities to participate in various activities at the university career center (e.g., career fair, mentoring, and informational interviews).

Regarding disability-specific factors, our findings also revealed that satisfaction with their current housing and access to university facilities can promote career agency. Recreation and leisure activities and academic accommodation became important dimensions of the support to explore career. Services such as academic advising, career counseling, mental health services, and peer support groups can help students with disabilities navigate their educational experience and promote personal and emotional well-being, consistent with previous studies (Coduti et al., 2016; Kowalsky & Fresko, 2002; Mazzotti et al., 2022; Morningstar et al., 2017; O'Shea et al., 2021).

Heterosexual individuals, men, and older students have relative advantages in their occupational awareness. Students with learning disabilities tended to maintain a positive outlook, and those with chronic medical conditions tended to establish a strong support system for job seeking. However, our findings implied that certain subgroups of students with disabilities may face unique challenges due to health disparities (Lombardi et al., 2018, 2022). Colleges and universities should proactively reach out to these students and offer targeted counseling and support services. To illustrate, a series of workshops or peer support groups can be created to support students with psychological disabilities in optimizing their career agency and positive outlooks. Program can be designed to help students with ASD in building occupational awareness.

Moreover, nonacademic soft skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and adaptability, are essential for career success (Lombardi et al., 2018). Students with disabilities can benefit from opportunities to develop and strengthen these skills through group projects, leadership roles, volunteer work, and extracurricular activities.

Limitations

It is imperative to acknowledge that the factors associated with career readiness, as delineated in this study, may exhibit variance among individuals. In addition, the extent of influence exerted by these factors can vary according to personal circumstances, the type of disability, and the presence of support systems. Given the heterogeneous nature of disability types and the limited sample size for certain categories, this study refrains from examining disparities among disability types within its scope.

The absence of a comparison group comprising students without disabilities hindered our ability to extrapolate our findings and pinpoint distinctive factors influencing career development among students with disabilities. Another limitation lies in the fact that the study was conducted at a single public university located in the Southeast with a high proportion of first-generation college students. Therefore, the findings may not be representative of the larger population of students with disabilities in different geographic locations or educational settings. Including a comparison group and replicating this study in a different context may help generalize results to other populations,

particularly those who chose not to disclose their disabilities.

Finally, while this study focused on several important factors related to career readiness, there may be additional variables or interactions between variables that were not considered. Future research could explore other potentially relevant factors such as socioeconomic status, previous work experiences, or employment status, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of career readiness among students with disabilities.

Implications

This study was undertaken with the aim of discerning distinctive elements conducive to fostering career readiness among students with disabilities. While our investigation initially sought out unique factors, our findings underscore the significance of universally applicable elements, notably the pivotal role of internships and career exploration. With exceptions for internship and professional presentation, respondents with disabilities also need to build more confidence in various career exploration activities listed in Table 2.

The acquisition of practical work experience through internships, apprenticeships, or part-time employment emerges as indispensable for students with disabilities striving for career readiness, particularly for those confronting limited access to such opportunities, necessitating a concerted effort to bolster self-assurance (Lombardi et al., 2018). These opportunities allow students with disabilities to apply their knowledge in real-world settings, develop essential workplace skills, build professional networks, and gain confidence in their abilities (Morningstar et al., 2017). Furthermore, engaging in networking activities and participating in professional development opportunities can help students with disabilities expand their professional contacts, stay current with industry trends, and acquire valuable skills (Carter et al., 2009). Attending career fairs, joining professional organizations, and seeking mentorship can all contribute to their career readiness.

Interestingly, the unexpected consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the rise of flexible work schedules and remote work opportunities, have opened doors for 61 million adults with disabilities. Career Centers can leverage this momentum to build business partnerships with industries and employers, providing students with disabilities the chance to engage in internships and apprenticeships in their chosen field (Carter et al., 2009). This not only provides practical work experience but also helps bridge the gap between academia and the workforce. By implementing these strategies and leveraging emerging opportunities, higher education institutions can play a pivotal role in fostering career readiness and success among students with disabilities.

Author Contributions

O.L. was responsible for conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript preparation. S.K. conducted data analysis and collaborated with manuscript preparation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Ethics Approval Statement

This research proposal was approved by the Institutional Review Board for Research with Human Subjects at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Protocol #: 19-0797).

Consent to Participate Statement

All respondents consented to participate in the study.

Permission to Reproduce Material From Other Sources

There are no reproducible materials from other sources in this manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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