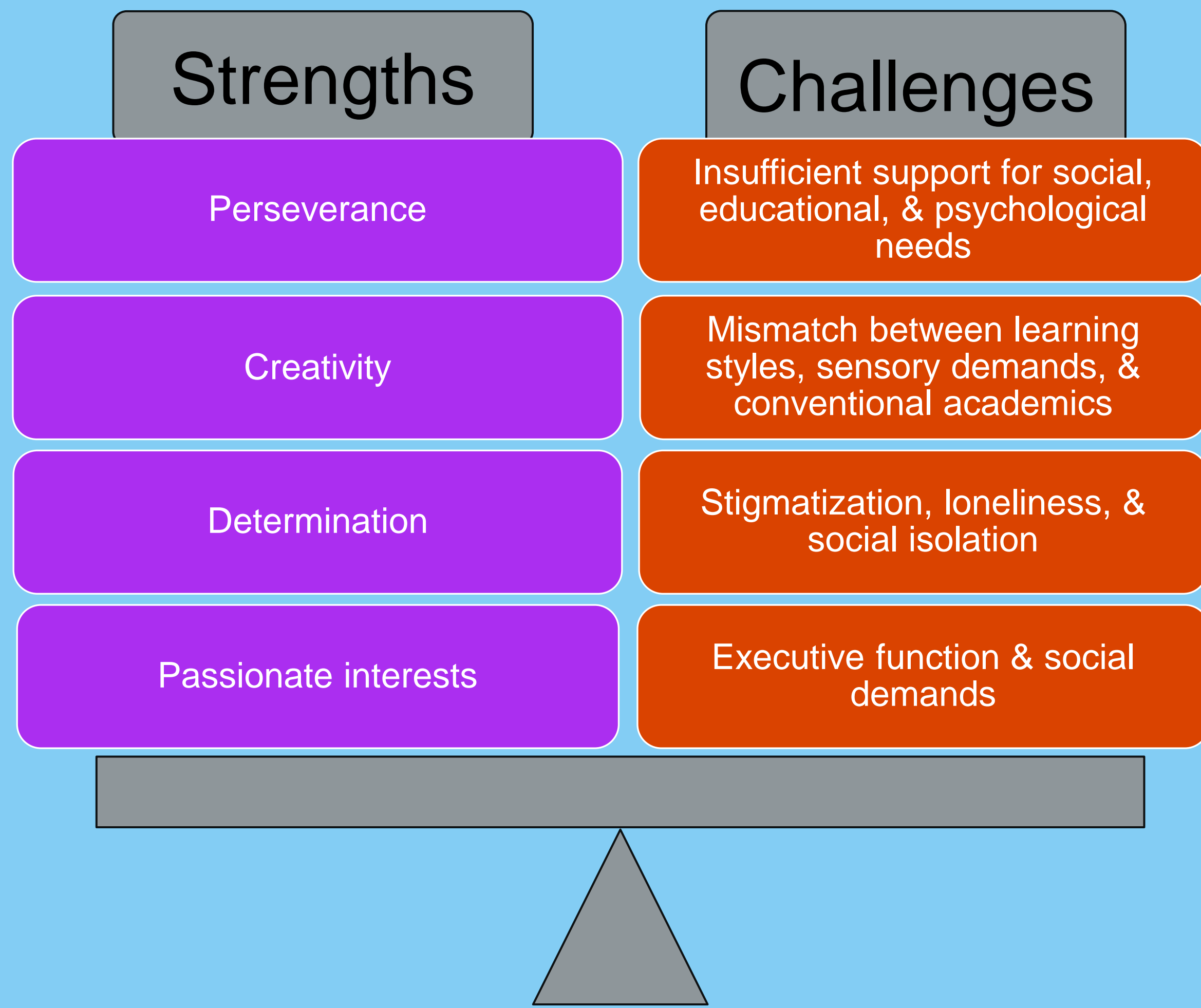


## Introduction

- With the increasing number of autistic students and students with ADHD (henceforth neurodivergent students) entering postsecondary education, it is imperative that colleges and universities address their unique social, learning, and mental health needs.
- Studies have shown that neurodivergent students are more prone to dropping out and less likely to attend graduate school than their neurotypical peers, often citing insufficient support for their social, educational, psychological needs.
- Neurodivergent students also struggle with the transition from education to employment.
  - The majority of autistic adults are either unemployed or underemployed.
  - Adults with ADHD have less earning potential and face a greater risk of quitting jobs, being laid off, and having less saved for retirement.



## Method

- **Autoethnography** is a qualitative research method that recognizes the researcher's role as both **observer** and **participant**.
- **Analytic autoethnography** is particularly effective when engaging in community-based research.
- This method invites the researcher(s) to use lived experience and **group membership** to expand practical and theoretical dimensions of social phenomena.

We engaged in a six-step analytic autoethnographic process illustrated in **Figure 1**, allowing for insider perspectives to inform the research process. The inclusion of neurodivergent individuals ensures greater agency and self-determination.

Collectively, we identified the barriers and challenges commonly experienced by neurodivergent students and graduates, which were shared in a Google Drive document.

These journaling experiences led to the creation of initial codes, which were then used to locate existing empirical and theoretical findings, focusing primarily on qualitative research data (i.e., neurodivergent student and graduate perspectives).

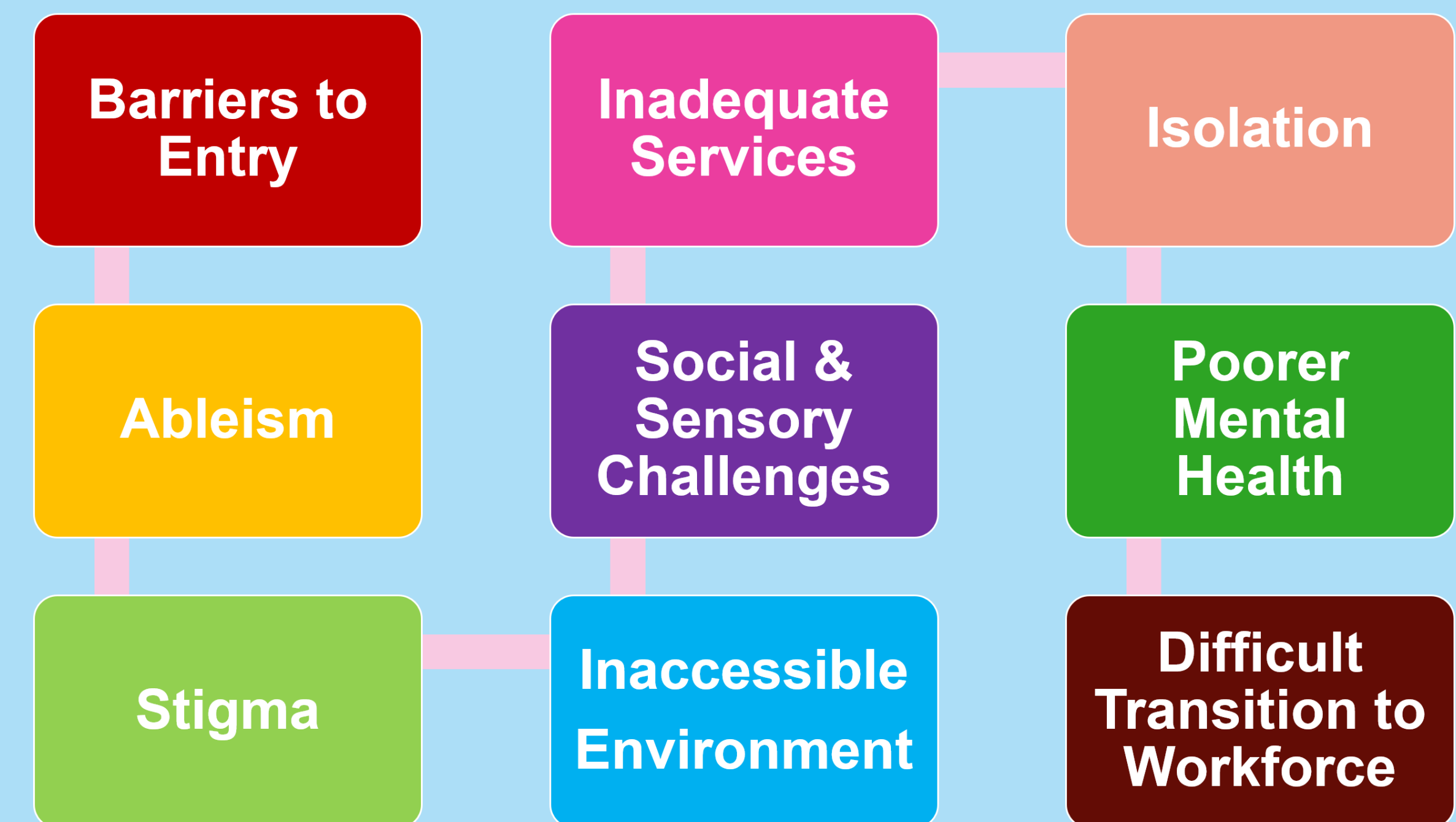
In subsequent group meetings, we analyzed and identified nine core themes that neurodivergent students face, as shown in **Figure 2**.

We concluded our research by using these themes to devise a questionnaire, with the goal of facilitating meaningful discussions and promoting actionable steps on how to better support the needs of neurodivergent students.

Figure 1. Analytic Autoethnographic Method



Figure 2. Themes



## Education Questionnaire for Institutions (Short Version)

- For many neurodivergent students, postsecondary education changes their living arrangements and disrupts their services, routines, and support systems. Does the institution offer transitional services to assist students with disabilities during onboarding?
- Are academic accommodations services discussed during the student onboarding process?
- Is there a section on the institutional website addressing disabilities and neurodiversity for students and caregivers?
- Are there education and technology specialists available to assist students with learning support?
- Are there initiatives to enhance community belongingness and self-advocacy for neurodivergent students?
- In addition to in-person counselling services, does the postsecondary institution offer virtual options to meet the preferences of students with disabilities?
- Are there sensory-friendly locations on campus for neurodivergent students looking to study?
- Are there accessible on-campus services, guides, and programs that support student health and wellbeing?
- Does the institution include neurodiversity in its equity, diversity, inclusion, and justice initiatives?
- Does the institution offer seminars or workshops for students with disabilities on how to access campus tools and resources?
- How does the institution confront ableism and structural barriers for neurodivergent students?
- Are professors and instructors trained to effectively communicate with students with disabilities?
- Does the institution provide opportunities for students with disabilities to cultivate the necessary skills to transition to graduate or professional school or the workforce?

## Discussion

- Our analysis revealed many internal stressors (e.g., stigma and fear of disability disclosure) and external barriers (e.g., discrimination and unaccommodating environments) that neurodivergent postsecondary students commonly experience. It is vital that colleges consider the pervasiveness of these challenges and devise impactful solutions for improving educational environments and campus services.
- The authors suggest that postsecondary institutions prioritize transitional challenges (i.e., entering and departing education), accessible service options for social and sensory processing needs, neurodiversity-affirming initiatives for community-building and belongingness, and informative training for faculty members on how to best support neurodivergent students.
- Unfortunately, many campuses and programs neglect neurodivergent and disabled individuals in equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) programming, resulting in further exclusion and systemic barriers to many graduate programs and professional opportunities.
- In the future, it is recommended that researchers continue to adopt community-based participatory research and qualitative methods when engaging with these topics. Moreover, systematic reviews and meta-analyses should be used to analyze and aggregate recommendations to support knowledge translation and implementation.

