

# CO-MENTORSHIP

## A Catalyst for Success

College graduates with autism are experiencing catastrophic unemployment rates of up to 85%; the NEXT CONNECTS co-mentorship program seeks to impact the next generation of autistic professionals.



A NEXT for AUTISM Strategic Report

Written by  
**Candace Weaver-Dowds, LMSW**  
Manager, Strategic Initiatives  
December 12, 2024

*Data reflects 2024 mentorship cohorts.*

NEXT CONNECTS is powered by NEXT for AUTISM and the Ramesh and Kalpana Bhatia Family Foundation.





# Executive Summary

Autistic professionals bring unique perspectives and skills to the workforce but often face barriers to career attainment and advancement. It is estimated 85% of autistic college graduates are under- or unemployed (David et al., 2023). This is in part due to a lack of tailored support and understanding in traditional workplace structures. Building on principles like reverse mentorship (Novak, 2023), NEXT CONNECTS is a cooperative co-mentorship model for neurodiverse professionals. At its core, NEXT CONNECTS strives to challenge a typical one-way transfer of knowledge, encouraging a reciprocal exchange of insights and experiences between co-mentors. This initiative is designed to address autistic unemployment, promote bi-directional learning, build inclusive workplaces and develop workplace allies.

“

## CO-MENTORSHIP (noun)

/ˈkō ˈmen-tər-ship/

**A collaborative and reciprocal mentorship relationship in which both participants—often with diverse backgrounds, experiences, or skill sets—serve as mentors to each other. Co-mentorship fosters mutual learning, growth, and support, emphasizing shared responsibility and equal value in the mentoring process.**

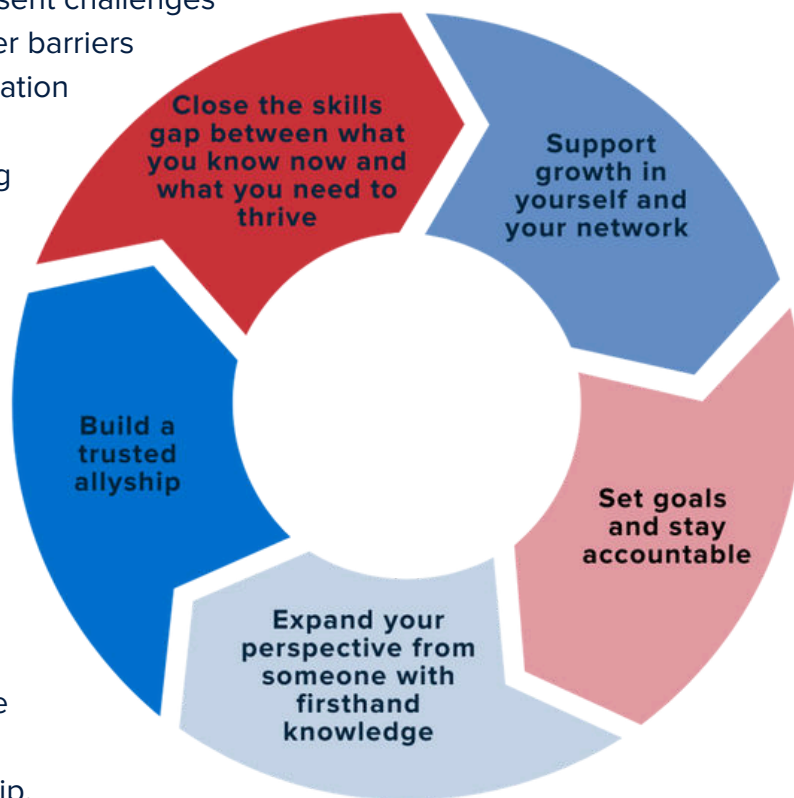
”

## INTRODUCTION

Conventional mentorship programs are often not flexible and do not address nuanced or unique support needs. Traditional mentorship models often fail to account for the neurodiverse experience, leading to missed opportunities for skill development, confidence-building, and meaningful career progression. Addressing these areas with inclusive strategies is essential for fostering a more supportive and empowering work environment for autistic individuals. Bi-directional co-mentorship, where both mentor and mentee learn from each other, offers an innovative solution. By fostering a two-way exchange, both parties gain pertinent skills to directly influence behavioral change.

## PROFESSIONAL NAVIGATION

Navigating the professional world can present challenges for autistic individuals when they encounter barriers related to certain autistic traits. Communication differences, for example, often shape interactions with others, potentially leading to misunderstandings, referred to as Double-Empathy (Zamzow, 2024), when communication styles diverge from neurotypical norms. Additionally, professional social contexts, such as networking events or nuanced office etiquette, can create further obstacles, affecting the ability to engage fully in these settings. Sensory processing differences make workplace and other professional environments overwhelming, impacting productivity and comfort. These challenges underscore the importance of supported learning and value of mentorship.



Structured bi-directional mentorship can help close skill gaps between what is known now and what is needed to thrive by fostering reciprocal exchanges of knowledge and experience. Such mentorship not only supports personal and network growth but also broadens perspectives, enabling individuals and organizations to benefit from diverse insights and collaborative problem-solving. This approach ensures a more inclusive and adaptive professional environment where all parties can thrive.

## PROGRAM OVERVIEW

NEXT CONNECTS is built on a two-way model of mentorship; moving beyond traditional structures for an equal exchange of insights and experience (Wilken et. all. 2021.) Similar models have found when there is a mutual sharing of knowledge, experience, and questioning both participants' experiences are enhanced. The uniqueness of this program is the intentionality of ensuring co-mentors have the same foundational knowledge in the effort to facilitate meaningful exchanges.

Recognizing the relationship building process takes time, the goal is that no one participant dominates the conversation. Through evidence-informed eLearning modules and curated agendas, NEXT CONNECTS ensures that each session is impactful, grounded in both competency-based mentorship and best practices for workplace inclusion (Chen & Chai, 2023) .



## BUILDING PARTNERSHIP ROLES

The Established Professional has been in their designated career for at least 3 years and may be a neurodivergent or neurotypical professional. Coming with varied backgrounds, interests, and specialties, these individuals have an understanding of on-the-job experience and insight for supporting their co-mentors grow in their careers. They are engaged in this program to ensure they are doing everything they can to support inclusion in the workplace.

The Aspiring Professional are neurodivergent individuals about to exit undergraduate or graduate school programs or have already received their degree. Whether they already have employment or job searching, these individuals will gain knowledge for success in their field of interest. They will complete the program having expanded their network and increased confidence in their ability to obtain employment.

## CORE COMPONENTS

### 1. MATCHING

Co-mentors matches are strategically made based on profession, interest, career goals, and industry to ensure meaningful connections. Each participant gains insights from their co-mentor, enabling established professionals to understand the unique strengths and challenges faced by autistic employees and providing aspiring professionals with firsthand knowledge of workplace practices and expectations in their chosen fields.

### 2. EVIDENCE-INFORMED MODULES

Participants completed evidence-informed, competency-based eLearning Modules before each meeting to provide similar foundational knowledge. Through a combination of video lessons, short readings, and real-world examples, co-mentors are provided with common language, concepts and a starting point for poignant discussion.

### 3. DISCUSSION

Through the online platform, dyads engage in self-paced learning and control scheduling of discussions, fostering mutual sharing of thoughts, ideas, and job skills.

### 4. RESOURCES

Both participant roles receive free actionable resources to enact real-time change and improve outcomes.





**PROGRAM  
OBJECTIVES**

**1**

**ADDRESS UNEMPLOYMENT**

Facilitating meaningful connections between aspiring and established professionals.

**2**

**BI-DIRECTIONAL LEARNING**

Elevating autistic viewpoints and encourages mutual learning between aspiring professionals with autism and established professionals.

**3**

**BUILD INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES**

By providing free actionable resources, **NEXT CONNECTS** enables participants to take small steps towards real workplace inclusion.

**4**

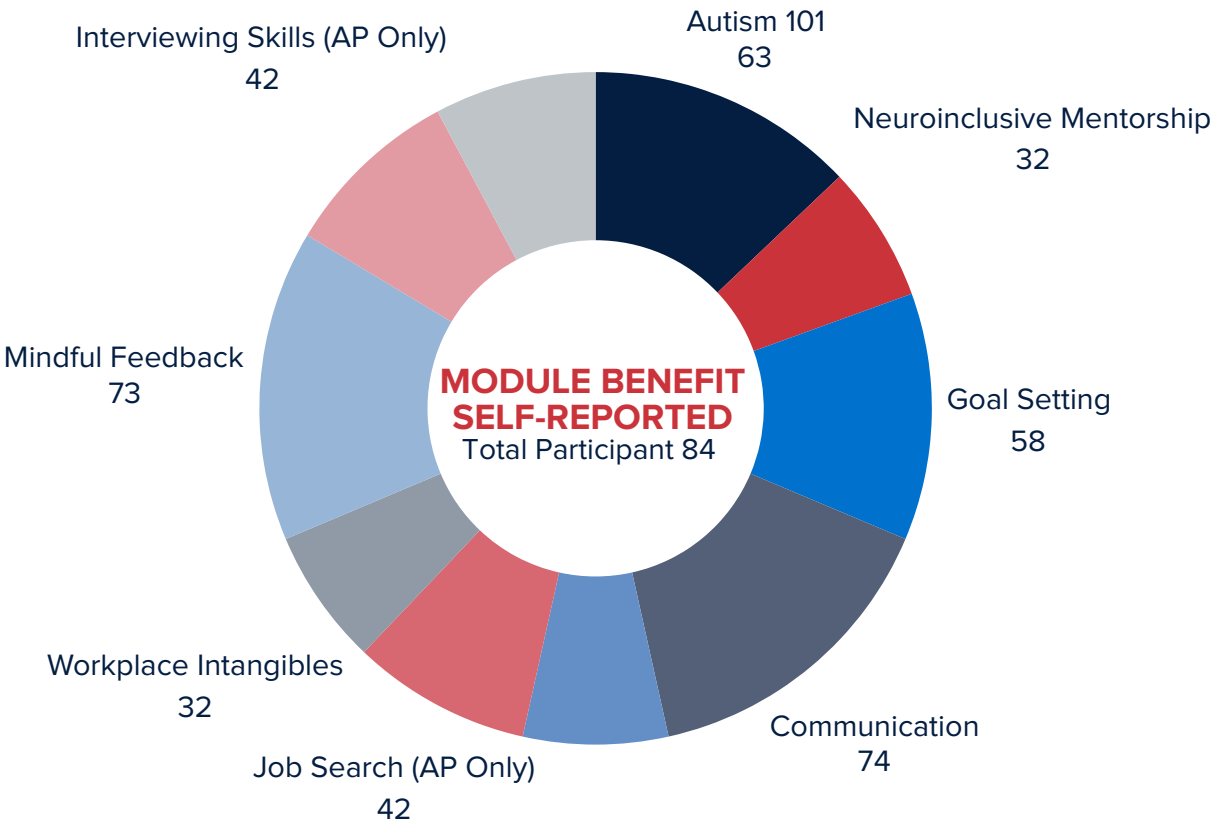
**DEVELOP WORKPLACE ALLIES**

Through dynamic dialogue, the program aims to create workplace allies and build skills in the nuances of successful employment for neurodivergent individuals.



# CONNECTS Sessions Report

**TOTAL PARTICIPANTS: 190**  
**TOTAL CONNECTIONS: 95**  
**TOTAL CONTINUING: 36**  
**NEW TO MENTORSHIPS: 54%**

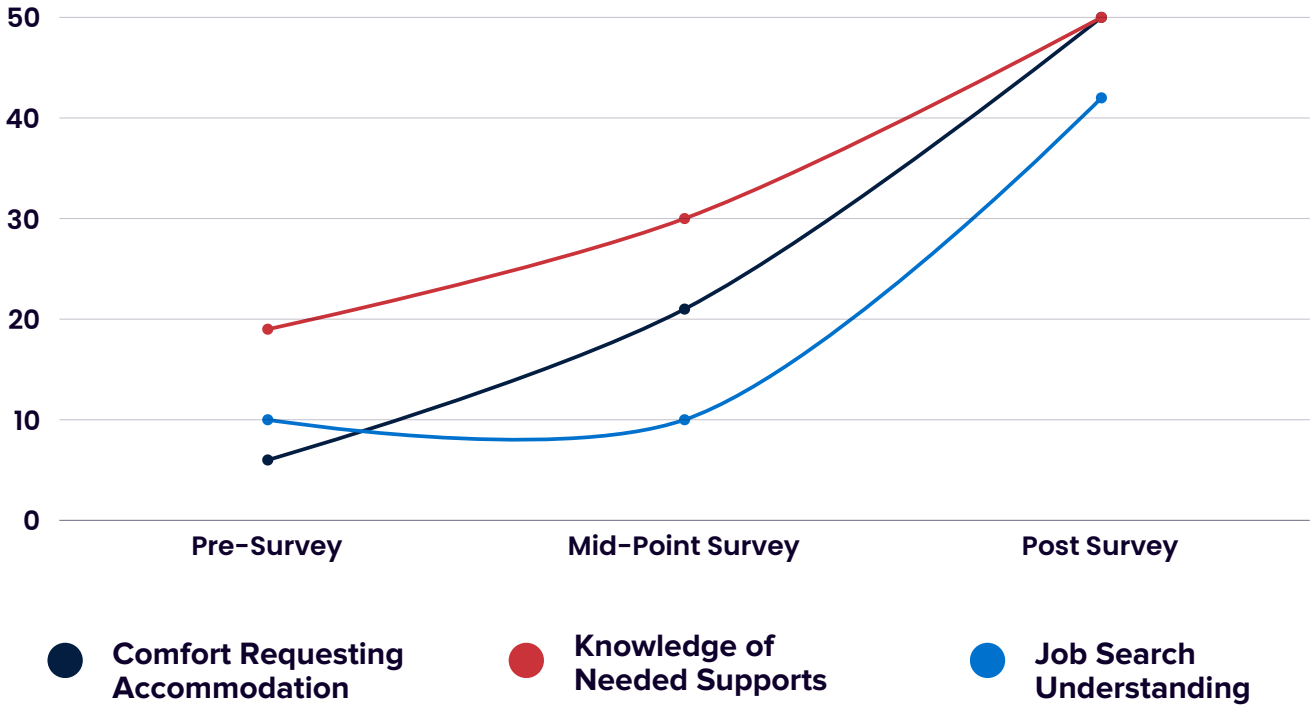




# CONNECTS Sessions Report, cont.

## PERCENTAGE OF SELF-IDENTIFIED SKILL GROWTH

Total Aspiring Professionals: 42







## CONNECTS General Overview

NEXT CONNECTS has completed two different virtual pilot sessions with synchronous and asynchronous formats, each designed to explore the effectiveness of the model and curriculum. Through these pilots, NEXT CONNECTS gained valuable insights into participant preferences, informing future program development to enhance accessibility and impact.

Both formats yielded positive outcomes and learning opportunities allowing for continuous improvements. Session one was conducted in real time, with direct content delivery and predetermined decision time. The second session utilized a mentorship online platform, with eLearning and dyads scheduled their own discussion sessions.



## 2023 SUMMER SESSION

For the first session, participants enrolled in one of two weekly scheduled times for content presentation and breakout sessions. Additionally, prior to start the program administrators made matches based on the limited information participants provided during enrollment.

## 2024 SUMMER SESSION

By utilizing an online platform, dyads were able access content via eLearning’s and schedule discussion sessions in a self-paced way. This platform also had capability for making recommended matches based on pre-determined criteria.

### PROS

- Real-time interactive experience
- Scheduled time provided accountability for attendance
- Immediate feedback on delivery
- Opportunity for clarification of concepts and vocabulary in the moment
- Live interactions, fostering a sense of community and real-time learning

### PROS

- Flexibility of scheduling
- Self-paced learning
- Content available to revisit, reflect and process
- Structured format with automatic reminders and session agendas



### LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Static scheduling made finding availability for all attendees was not possible.
- Limit information for matching participants
- Inability to track admin tasks
- Educational content was only available during session
- Limited opportunity to support multiple learning styles and needs

### LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Limited control on participant engagement
- Increased time for problem solving



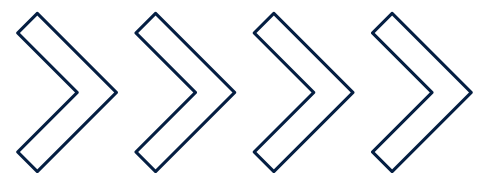
### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Aspiring Professionals preferred neurodivergent co-mentors
- Participants obtained a greater understanding of personal accommodation and support needs
- The email cadence of reminders and other programmatic announcements needs to be reexamined



### WHAT'S NEXT?

- We continue to evaluate the content, delivery, and quality of the program
- Adding additional eLearnings about topics identified by participants
- Building additional models and resources focusing on soft skills
- Test a university-based model where support on the ground can facilitate program completion
- Follow up with participants post program completion, at 6 months and 12 months, for employment metrics.



## CONCLUSION

NEXT CONNECTS represents a transformative approach to mentorship by fostering bi-directional learning and promoting workplace inclusion. By challenging the traditional, hierarchical mentorship model, NEXT CONNECTS enables a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and experiences that benefits both aspiring and established professionals. This innovative program bridges critical gaps in workplace understanding and support, addressing barriers like communication differences, sensory challenges, and navigating nuanced company culture.

The program's structured components equip each participant with tools to create and influence lasting change. The pilot sessions have demonstrated the model's flexibility and effectiveness, underscoring its potential to reshape mentorship practices and workplace dynamics.

NEXT CONNECTS is not just a mentorship program; it is a movement toward a more inclusive professional landscape. By fostering mutual growth and understanding, this initiative empowers autistic professionals to achieve their career aspirations while cultivating workplace allies who are better equipped to support neurodiverse talent.

### REFERENCES

Chen, YC., Chai, CC. (2023) Development of a two-way mentorship scale focusing on next-generation core competencies. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* volume 10, Article number: 629.

Davies, J., Heasman, B., Livesey, A., Walker, A., Pellicano, E., & Remington, A. (2023). Access to employment: A comparison of autistic, neurodivergent and neurotypical adults' experiences of hiring processes in the United Kingdom. *Autism : the international journal of research and practice*, 27(6), 1746–1763. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221145377>

Novak, N. (2023, September 26). Reverse mentoring helps construction vets learn from tech-savvy GenZ. *Construction Dive*.

Welink, L. S., van Charldorp, T. C., Di Colandrea, L., Bartelink, M. L., Pype, P., Damoiseaux, R. A. M. J., & de Groot, E. (2021). Bidirectional learning opportunities: How GP-supervisors and trainees exchange knowledge. *Medical education*, 55(12), 1407–1418.

Zamzow, R. (2024, October 1). Double empathy, explained. *The Transmitter: Neuroscience News and P*



Learn more at [NEXTforAUTISM.org/CONNECTS](https://NEXTforAUTISM.org/CONNECTS),  
or email [SI@NEXTforAUTISM.org](mailto:SI@NEXTforAUTISM.org) to speak with a  
member of our team. Thank you.

