Disability or Divergent Characteristic?

Inside the Neurodiversity Movement

By Sean Nyhan

When a typical student thinks about the college admission office, one word probably comes to mind: gatekeeper. In reality, though, admission officers have more in common with city planners. From the postsecondary side, it's less about "who we let in" and more about "who we are." They're building communities—finding and selecting the students they think will thrive there. For decades, colleges and universities have been trying to look beyond simple standardized test scores to cultivate a harmonious campus culture with a wide variety of voices.

While topics like socioeconomics, race, gender, veterans, transfer students, and other underserved populations frequently grab headlines, another student category often gets left out of the conversation about diversity. Society typically labels students with neurological differences—which can include dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, Tourette Syndrome, and others—as "students with disabilities." It's time to reframe how we view this student population and align it with missions to increase diversity and inclusion within communities of higher education.

The term "neurodiversity" dates back to the 1990s, but researchers, educators, and advocates have just recently begun to see it proliferate into admission and enrollment conversations. "[Neurodiversity] is much more a strength than a challenge," said Landmark College (VT) President Peter Eden. "But like everything else it takes a long time for higher education institutions and society in general to understand, accept, and embrace differences."

Neurodiversity argues that the wide spectrum of neurological conditions derives from ordinary variations in the human genome. Autism and ADHD, for example, are not diseases or disorders, the movement argues. They simply represent different ways of thinking and communicating.

"Autistic people have always been part of the human community, though they have often been relegated to the margins of society," writes Steve Silberman in his book *NeuroTribes*: *The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*. For most of the 20th century, Silberman notes, the dominant medical opinions at the time hid people with autism behind inaccurate labels, including schizoid personality disorder, childhood schizophrenia, and even theorized their behavior resulted from brain damage. He highlights the tendency for society to diagnose, treat, and cure neurologically diverse people.

Instead, there may be a much simpler solution. If we accept these differences not as obstacles but more as human character traits, we may be better positioned to support this underserved, and often misunderstood, population.

"Their diversities are as important as the other diversities that college is seeking to cultivate in its student population," said Thomas Armstrong, author of *The Myth of the ADHD Child: 101 Ways to Improve Your Child's Behavior and Attention Span without Drugs, Labels, or Coercion*. Armstrong also serves as executive director for the American Institute for Learning and Human Development, an organization he founded to provide "timely, practical, and cutting-edge" information for children, adolescents, and adult learners.

Armstrong strongly believes that neurodiverse students can elevate any college campus with a number of unique contributions. These gifts, he said, include superior visual-spatial abilities (dyslexia), good information technology skills (autism), novel problem-solving capability (ADHD), personal warmth and charm (intellectual disabilities), and creative talent (mental illness).

Eden agrees. "Neurodiversity is an example of diversity writ large, so what college or university would not want to diversify its student body, given all of the benefits diversity brings?" he said. In fact, Landmark College exclusively enrolls students who learn differently. The Vermont college has been enrolling students in this underserved category for more than 30 years. "Neurodivergent students often solve problems differently, have creative approaches to problems, challenges, and opportunities."

In *NeuroTribes*, Silberman's interpretation of the human mind resembles the way we think of a computer's operating system, instead of the traditional diagnostic perspective that applies labels like dyslexia and ADHD. "Just because a computer is not running windows doesn't mean that it's broken," he writes.

The neurodiversity approach to learning represents a seismic cultural and intellectual shift in the way we think about learning, but its core tenants originate in hard science. Proponents of the approach reference research into the human genome. In *NeuroTribes*, Silberman writes:

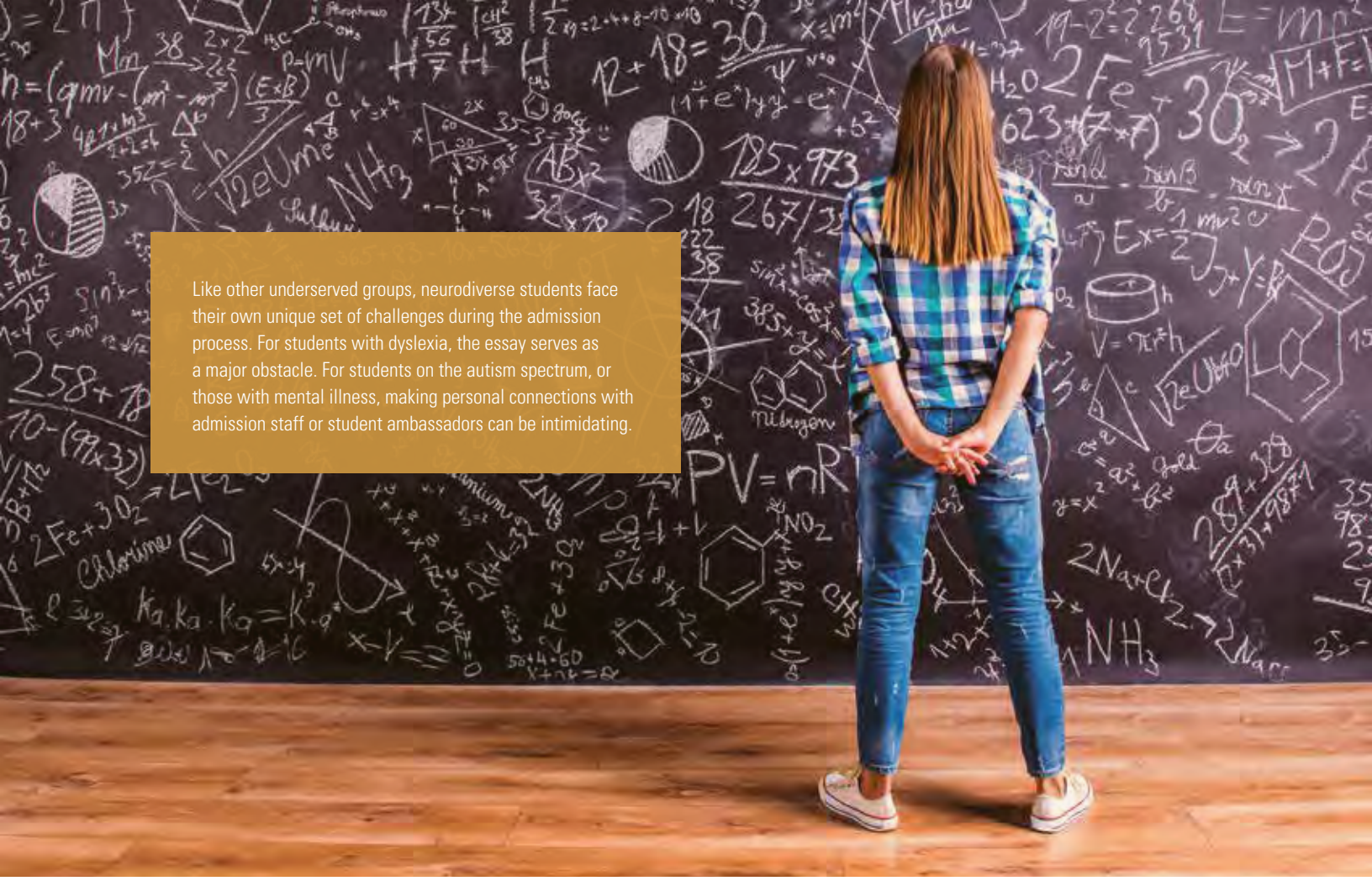
> In recent years, researchers have determined that most cases of autism are not rooted in rare de novo mutations but in very old genes that are shared widely in the general population while being concentrated more in certain families than others. Whatever autism is, it is not a unique product of modern civilization. It is a strange gift from our deep past, passed down through millions of years of evolution.

Before assuming his presidential duties at Landmark, Eden served as a professor of biotechnology at Endicott College (MA). For him, the career pivot was not as peculiar as it might seem. Much like innovative technologies, he believes that "higher education is constantly evolving." During his tenure at Endicott, he assumed various administrative roles with increasing responsibility. He eventually found a role at Landmark that would allow him to help grow a relatively young community into a cutting-edge academic destination for a mostly undiscovered pool of students.

Neurodiversity may be a trending topic, but Eden and others advise neurodiverse students to help those working with them understand how they learn. "Our recommendation to the applicant[s] would be to contextualize or define neurodiversity as it relates specifically to [them]." Students should also be prepared to discuss their different learning styles with admission personnel.

Armstrong similarly encourages students to reference their learning style against a detailed backdrop. "I think it's useful to mention neurodiversity in an essay to reinforce the idea that the student brings diversity to the table, and then a listing of strengths and challenges will provide the specificity the admission staff needs to see the uniqueness of each applicant."

Aaminah Shakur, a consultant for disabled and neurodivergent students in navigating academia and self-advocacy, noted that these efforts also need to be extended by those working with the students. "It is also vitally important



Like other underserved groups, neurodiverse students face their own unique set of challenges during the admission process. For students with dyslexia, the essay serves as a major obstacle. For students on the autism spectrum, or those with mental illness, making personal connections with admission staff or student ambassadors can be intimidating.

that admission staff be familiar with the language and issues these students may bring up," said Shakur, a neurodivergent student herself. "It is not a sustainable or accessible method to expect the student to articulate these things satisfactorily to professionals who can and should use other resources to help them understand the situation."

Like other underserved groups, neurodiverse students face their own unique set of challenges during the admission process. For students with dyslexia, the essay serves as a major obstacle. For students on the autism spectrum, or those with mental illness, making personal connections with admission staff or student ambassadors can be intimidating. "If a prospective student is on the spectrum, the social interaction component of the campus visit, interview, or orientation process could be a barrier," said Eden.

Fortunately, there are some resources for neurodiverse students. Landmark College has always been recognized as a leader in services that welcome and nurture neurodiversity, but it represents just one of thousands of options available. "Prospective students should turn to family members, should carefully and critically review online resource guides," Eden said.

Family members can offer emotional support and assist with practical admission application requirements, but other public resources can supply additional technical, professional assistance. Groups like the Dyslexic Advantage, Eye to Eye, Best Buddies, and other advocacy organizations provide important guidance based on decades of experience with neurodiverse students. Private consultants who specialize in helping neurodiverse students are also available and can be found online.

Shakur encourages admission professionals to be on the lookout for students and families who aren't equipped to find extra support. "It is important to remember that a high number of neurodiverse students also live with other racial, socioeconomic class, physical disability, and other marginalizations. This includes a higher rate of homeless experiences than the rest of the student body," she said.

On the postsecondary side, campuses have started to offer specialized orientation programs. For example, the William and Mary Bridge Program offers freshman and transfers the opportunity to acclimate themselves early and meet and socialize with other neurodiverse students about a month before traditional freshman orientations begin.

Still, the field of services available to students identifying as neurodiverse pales in comparison to the infrastructure in place for other student demographics. To make matters worse, researchers are still trying to agree on what the label means and how it should be applied. Nick Walker, an author and educator with autism, argues that the term "neurominority" better characterizes these students because it distinguishes a particular group of underserved students from the broader theory of neurodiversity.

Eden is firmly committed to making room for neurodiverse students. "I would say that we are in a neurodiversity moment, or movement," he said. "In the end, neurodivergent students are just as college-capable as "neurotypical" students—although we don't believe there is any truly neurotypical status; they simply need for the faculty and staff to better understand their challenges and their strengths."

Sean Nyhan is an education writer based in Boston.

Sensitivity reader **Aaminah Shakur** is a consultant for disabled and neurodivergent students in navigating academia and self-advocacy.