What Every Educator Needs to Know About Neurodivergence

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Abstract

There is a great need for education and training about neurodiversity due to the rapid increase of neurodivergent students enrolling in postsecondary educational programs. As neurodivergent professionals, we offer a look at the common myths and misunderstandings that plague neurodivergent students as well as highlight the strengths neurodivergent students bring to the classroom. We explain typical challenges and barriers to success neurodivergent students face as well as ways faculty and staff can support neurodivergent students.

What Every Educator Needs to Know About Neurodivergence

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term that recognizes the differences in cognitive functioning as part of the natural variation in human development (Kuder et al. 2021). Under this umbrella are neurotypical individuals who's cognitive functioning aligns with societal standards and [1]neurodivergent individuals who's brains function differently from societal norms. Neurodiversity includes neurominorities such as those with autism, ADHD, dyspraxia, mental health, and learning disabilities as well as neurotypical people (Hughes, 2016). Unfortunately, neurodivergent traits are often treated as deficiencies in educational and professional settings. Neurodiversity as a movement aims to eradicate this stigma and embrace different ways of being. As neurodivergent professionals in higher education, we will discuss common myths and misunderstandings about neurodiversity, the challenges neurominorities face, and offer concrete advice on providing informed support for neurodivergent students.

Myths and Misunderstandings

There is a misguided notion that symptoms of ADHD, autism and learning disabilities dissipate in adulthood. Though many neu rodivergent individuals learn coping skills to better manage their challenges as well as how to mask their symptoms to appear more neurotypical, most still experience challenges in adulthood (Hull et al., 2017). This is more noticeable as neurodivergent college students enroll in a postsecondary system that is not prepared to meet their needs.

The social norms of higher education are built on neurotypical standards and undervalue neurodivergent ways of being. For instance, students are discouraged from rocking, pacing, fidgeting, or engaging in other [2]self-stimulating behaviors in the classroom. Students are expected to sit still and focus on the teacher, which is neurotypically interpreted as listening and paying attention. These behaviors are counterintuitive to the needs of many neurodivergent students who need to move, engage in self-stimulating

1 Person-first language is often promoted to be inclusive (Ex: Person with a disability). However, it is more commonly preferred in the Neurodiverse community to use identity-first language (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2020b). It is most important to respect the language chosen by individuals when it comes to social identities. In this article, we will be using the more commonly preferred identity-first language.

2 Self-stimulating behaviors (stimming) are repetitive movements used to stimulate one's senses. Stimming can be soothing and allow the individual to cope with over- or under- stimulating environments.

behaviors, or avoid eye contact which can be uncomfortable. Neurodivergent students may struggle to conform to neurotypical standards for communication and engagement including how to interact with peers and build healthy relationships. This can lead to neurodivergent students feeling isolated, misunderstood, and stigmatized.

College students are expected to have well developed executive functioning skills to manage their time, tasks, and resources with little support. Neurodivergent students may find the process of establishing a new routine overwhelming and require greater support with setting up a schedule and connecting with campus resources. The process for establishing services with different offices can require multiple points of contact and following up with emails or phone calls. The process may discourage neurodivergent students from seeking help when it is needed.

In postsecondary education, students must self-disclose to receive accommodations; however, many choose not to disclose their diagnosis due to stigma (Kuder & Accardo, 2018). Furthermore, accommodations are not available for many neurodivergent adults who are either unaware they are neurodivergent or do not have a diagnosis. For example, within the population of autistic people, research estimated that 50-60% are not diagnosed (Lewis, 2017). At the same time, accommodations provided under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and section 504C of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (504C) do not meet the nonacademic needs of neurodivergent individuals, and institutions may lack the funding and resources to provide additional nonacademic supports.

Faculty and staff in higher education are oftentimes underprepared to meet the needs of neurodiverse students and often perceive "difference" as negative (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Many neurodivergent students share similar stories of being recipients of ableist attitudes and microaggressions from teachers and counselors in K-12 (Shmulsky, 2022). Statements, like the ones listed below, demonstrate a misunderstanding of neurodivergent traits and lead to neurodivergent students not receiving the support they need. Statements or questions that are frequently reported by neurodivergent individuals as hurtful or offensive include:

- You don't seem autistic, to have ADHD, etc. or I never would've guessed you are _____.
- You must be very high functioning.
- I think we're all a little bit _____.
- Are you sure? _____ is over diagnosed nowadays.
- What treatments or therapies have you tried to not be _____?
- But you're not disabled, right?
- You can't have ADHD; you have a PhD.
- ADHD isn't real, it's just laziness.
- ADD stands for "acute discipline disorder."

Ableism and stereotyping prevent many students from seeking assistance in postsecondary education and contribute to the challenges neurodivergent students already face on a daily basis. Common misunderstandings undermine the strengths associated with neurodivergence. Neurodivergent individuals are known for their creativity, intelligence, intuition, humor, hyperfocus and focus precision, pattern recognition, written communication, oral communication, remaining calm when others are in distress, quick-thinking and decision-making, envisioning, 3D thought and spatial concepts, honesty and sincerity, transparency, non-linear thought, strong memory, analytics skills, powers of observation, impartiality, empathy, acceptance of others, and willingness to listen (Dymond et al., 2017; Schippers et al., 2022; Van Hees et al., 2015)

Challenges

Along with being misunderstood, neurodivergent students face many challenges in postsecondary education. Common issues students face include maintaining their mental health, accessing and receiving accommodations, utilizing campus resources, stigma, and the hidden costs of disability (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2020a).

Many neurodivergent students in higher education report feeling isolated and not accepted, which has a negative impact on mental health (Shmulsky, 2022). Autistic adults are more likely to think about or attempt suicide, and in particular, autistic adults without

intellectual disability are nine times more likely to commit suicide than neurotypical adults (Cusack et al., 2016). Over 60% of neurodivergent adults report a comorbid diagnosis of anxiety and/or depression (Hillier et al., 2020).

Another contributor to poor mental health is the burden of self-disclosure and self-advocacy. Holding neurodivergent students responsible for educating their educators about their differences contributes to burnout (Hamilton & Petty, 2023). Their executive dysfunction is often misperceived as stress, anxiety, or willful lack of motivation, particularly with women, black individuals, and other historically minoritized ethnic groups (Doyle, 2020).

In K-12 education, neurodivergent students are eligible for accommodations under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendment (IDEA, 1997) and 504C. Under IDEA, academic accommodations promote success in the classroom which includes changing curriculum, providing support for executive functioning and self-regulation. In postsecondary education, students receive accommodations under the ADA and 504C which only allow for equitable access to education. The accommodations under ADA and 504C often do not address the needs of neurodivergent students who require additional support in the areas of executive functioning, self-regulation, social and communication skills. Less than 5% of colleges and universities in the United States provide these additional supports through specialized programs for neurodivergent students (Nachman et al., 2022; Wischnewsky, in press). Luckily, there is much neurotypical educators and college administrators can do to improve the experiences of neurominorities by demonstrating awareness and employing universal design.

Ways to Support Neurodivergent Students

Affirming neurodivergent students in the college classroom begins with the syllabus, where the instructor can communicate an awareness of and openness to students' potential needs and to specific neurominority behaviors (Womack, 2015). To do so, the syllabus should include information about disability services, counseling, and student support resources on campus; instructors should explain how to access these services in plain, non-clinical language (Strimel & Northrup, 2022). Finally, teachers should be precise in the syllabus about late policies and attendance policies, making it clear when students are allowed to ask for modifications and extensions (Sulik & Keys, 2014).

The instructor's next step is to create a day-to-day environment that normalizes neurominorities' ways of learning. For example, the instructor can foster an environment in which moving around and taking breaks as needed are encouraged to benefit a student's focus and introverted students are as welcome in the class as talkative ones (Birdwell & Bayley, 2022). For in-class writing and studying activities, the instructor can allow students to bring headphones or to leave the classroom to find a quieter space. In classroom setup, it can be helpful to provide a text-based chat students can access during class so students can share their experiences with the teacher as an alternative to speaking in front of the class. Instructors can bring fidget toys and headphones for students to use as needed. In curriculum and assignment design, instructors can share texts produced by neurodivergent thinkers. In addition, Open Educational Pedagogy suggests that students flourish best when offered a range of options for how to navigate the class's required skills, knowledge, and deliverables (Birdwell & Bayley, 2022; McKeon et al., 2013). One way to do this is to ask students to co-create the syllabus, coming up with assessment options available to a range of student needs. To learn how well their strategies are reaching students, teachers can create an anonymous mid-semester survey, facilitated by a neutral professional if possible, asking students to provide open-ended feedback.

Beyond the classroom, colleges and universities can offer nonacademic support programs to meet the needs of neurodivergent students. Targeted support programs typically address nonacademic needs including time management, social skills, communication and navigating the college system. Programs also provide social support, peer mentoring, and teach self-advocacy skills. These programs help raise awareness about neurodiversity and may offer professional development and educational opportunities for students, faculty, and staff.

Conclusion

Many neurodivergent students report being told to "try harder" which is hurtful and can further isolate a neurodivergent individual (Shmulsky, 2022). It is up to educators to be more inclusive and open to neurodivergent behavior (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2022). Our goal here is not to identify or diagnose the people we work with or the students we serve; rather the aim is understanding and acceptance to lead to more inclusive spaces.

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