

Chapter 5

Creating Specialized Programming to Support Neurodivergent Students: Considerations, Readiness, Outreach

Laura K. Sibbald

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5873-1022>

Chestnut Hill College, USA


Carol Rogers-Shaw

University of Dayton, USA

Karen Krainz-Edison

The Ohio State University, USA

Sara Sanders Gardner

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5695-3300>

Bellevue College, USA

Cindy Lowman-Stieby

Xavier University, USA

ABSTRACT

The increasing numbers of neurodivergent students attending universities and the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADA-AA) create a need for university and community stakeholders to provide more inclusive opportunities for all students. This juxtaposes with the intersectionality of neurodiversity as part of an overall diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging effort. This chapter provides a pathway to develop an implementation process that offers acceptance for neurodivergent staff, faculty, and students across their campus and within their community through inclusive programming. It expounds upon the university-wide advantages of inclusive programming for neurodivergent students, identifies cross campus approaches to prepare for executing a neurodivergent programming plan, and reveals strategies to establish broad support from university and community members.

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INTRODUCTION

The numbers of neurodivergent (ND) individuals on postsecondary campuses is growing each year, and they continue to face constant challenges related to neurofunctional differences and accommodation needs, but they also experience challenges due to prejudice and stereotyping (Cox & South, 2017; Gurbuz et al., 2018; Lubin & Brooks, 2021). A requirement to evaluate and document university “fairness in admissions, an inclusive learning environment, and equitable student outcomes” (Cumming et al., 2023, para.3) was established by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) in 2021. In order for ND students to be successful, campuses must provide more support for students and education for neurotypical faculty, staff, and students. Recommendations include recognizing neurodiversity as a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) issue, integrating disability accommodations to enhance accessibility through Neurodiversity Support Programs, establishing support for transition into higher education, recognizing and accommodating sensory discomfort, improving mental health support, and adding assistance for successful transition to life after postsecondary education (Dwyer et al., 2022; Gartland & Strosnider, 2023).

With increasing numbers of ND students pursuing postsecondary education (Cox, 2017; De Los Santos et al., 2019; Lai, 2021; Leake & Stodden, 2014), establishing inclusive programming for them that promotes an understanding of the value of a diverse higher education environment is crucial. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a concrete pathway to illustrate dynamic and innovative practices for meeting ND student needs. We enumerate ways to bring together educators, support personnel, researchers, and community members to recruit ND students and offer them opportunities for a college experience that supports positive identity creation, increases knowledge acquisition, develops life skills, and integrates students of various talents and abilities into a thriving, inclusive college campus. It is important to identify the connections between inclusive programming for ND students and institutional mission, values, and benefits for the wider student population. Professional development plans, opportunities for engagement, funding sources, and approaches supporting accessibility practices are necessary for successful implementation of inclusive programming. Specific steps to involve community stakeholders for purposes of recruitment, retention, internships, mentorships, employment, and student and family outreach must be undertaken.

UNDERSTANDING NEURODIVERSITY

The increasing number of neurodivergent students, staff and faculty on college and university campuses is adding to learning opportunities for both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. Although their numbers are increasing, their presence is still significantly lower than it could be. Statistics have revealed that “1 in 68 people are diagnosed with ASD” (Baio et al., 2018), and “more than 44 percent of students with autism receive some type of postsecondary education in the United States; people with autism make up 1 to 2 percent of students in universities” (Cox, 2017, para. 4). Neurodivergent students are not attending higher education at the same rate as their neurotypical counterparts and/or they are not receiving the support they need to be successful for a number of reasons which may include: fear of being stigmatized, lack of knowledge about their diagnosis and opportunities for support, and a desire to be independent and like those who are neurotypical (Elias & White, 2018). Acceptance and appreciation of neurodiversity supports all students and the campus climate as a whole.

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