Supporting Neurodivergent Students in the Classroom and Beyond

From Accommodations to Inclusive Practice

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COLLEGE  CAREER

Welcome



Day Agenda

Part One:
Supporting Neurodivergent Students in the Classroom and Beyond: From Accommodations to Inclusive Practice

Part Two:
Building Coordinated Systems of Support for Neurodivergent Students

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Today's Agenda

1. 10:00–10:10 — Welcome & Introductions

   Getting to know each other and setting the tone for the day.

2. 10:11–10:20 —Foundations of Neurodiversity

   Core concepts, common neurotypes, and the neurodiversity framework.

3. 10:20–10:50 — Building Neuro-Affirming Practices

   Supporting communication differences and building trust with neurodivergent students.

4. 10:50–11:00 — Break (10 minutes)

   Break and informal networking. Join back when you're ready.

5. 11:00–11:45 — Applying UDL and Scenario-Based Learning

6. 11:45–12:00 — Resources & Q&A

   Tools to take back to your campus, open discussion, and next steps.

Access Considerations

While we're together today…



Move Freely

Feel free to move, step out, or take breaks as needed throughout the day. Your comfort matters.



Tech Encouraged

Phones and laptops are welcome for note-taking, looking things up, and any accessibility needs.



Fidgets Welcome

Use any fidget tool or sensory item that helps you stay regulated and engaged.



All Participation Modes Valid

Participation looks different for everyone: listening, writing, drawing, or speaking are all welcome here.

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What do you hope to get out of our time together?

Take a moment to reflect: what would make today most valuable for you and the students you support?

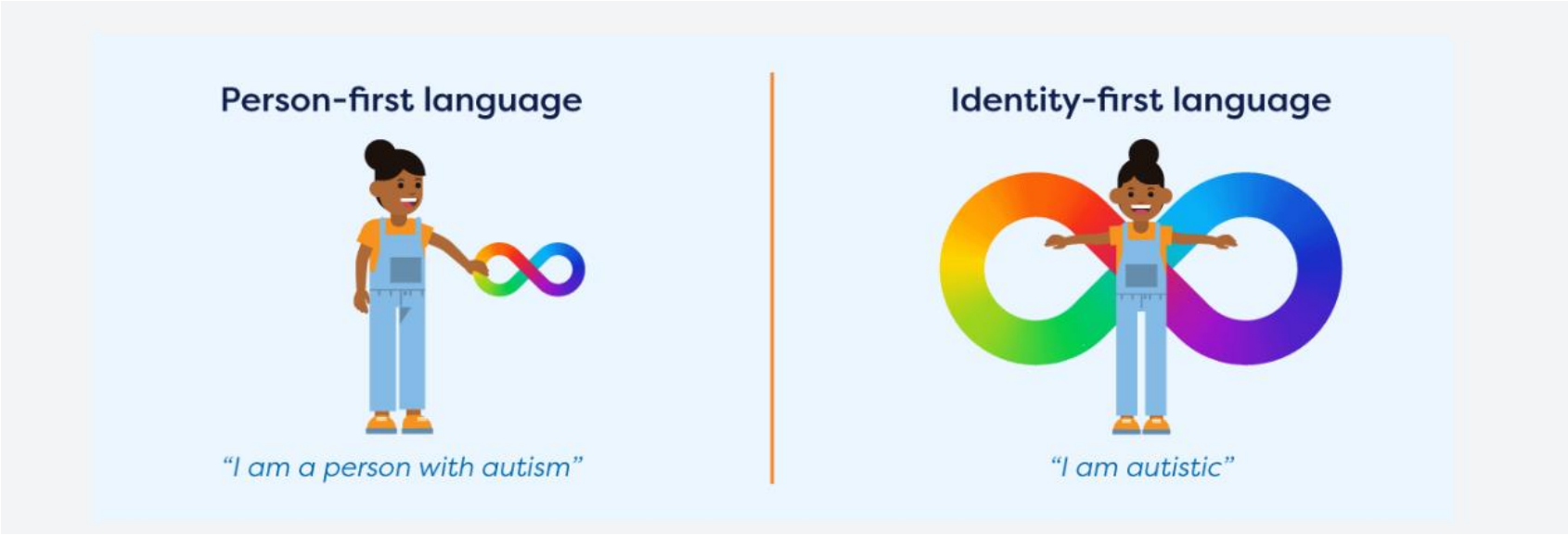


Learning Objectives:

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

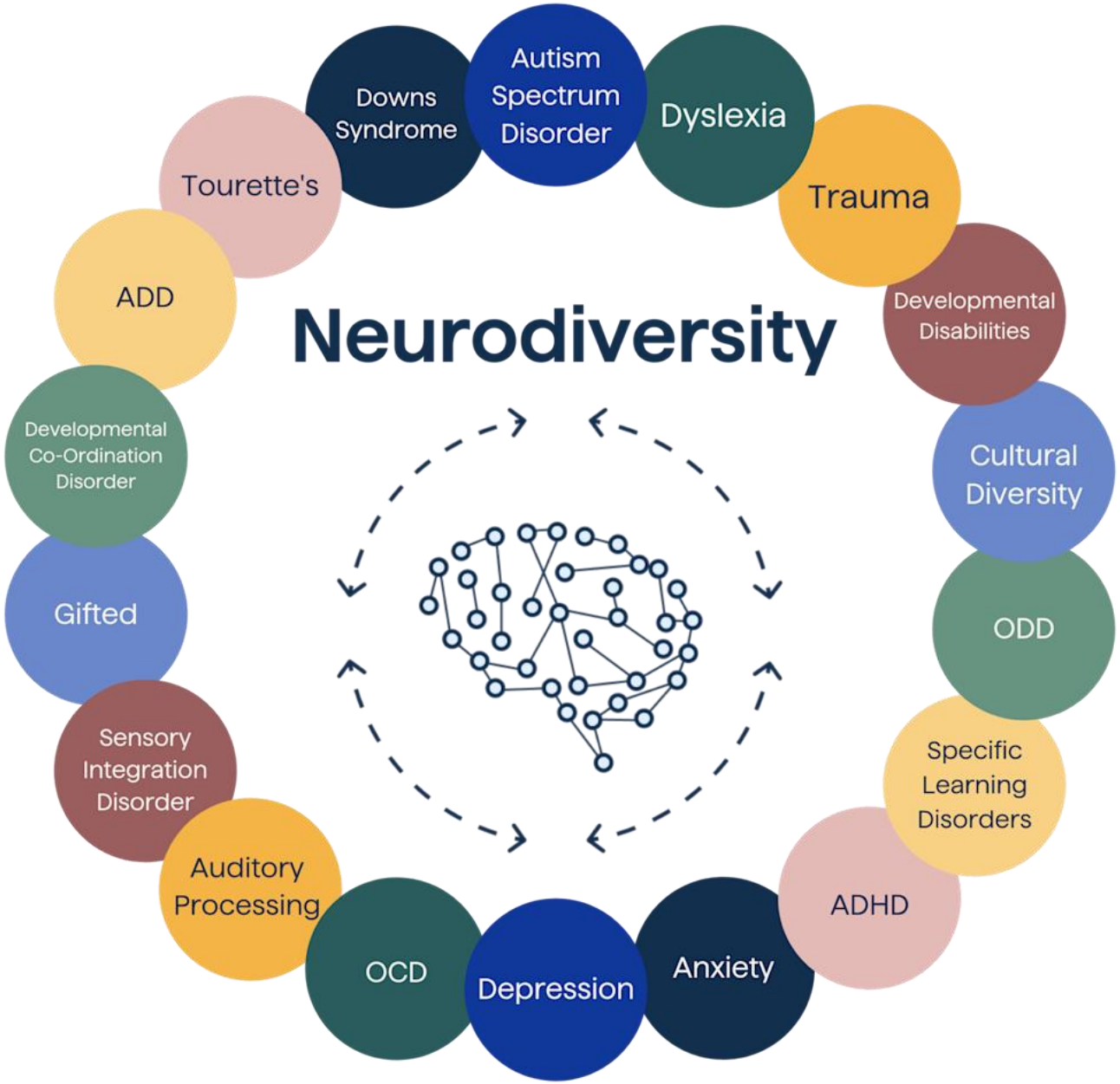
- **Identify-** common barriers autistic and neurodivergent students may experience and how they relate to classroom participation.
- **Apply** -Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and neuroinclusive teaching strategies to increase clarity, predictability, flexibility, and engagement for a broad range of learners.
- **Implement** -practical strategies for responding to accommodation requests, student disclosure, communication differences, and other common classroom situations while maintaining appropriate academic standards.

Language Note



On a national and international scale, there are consistent conversations about person first vs. identity based language. For the purpose of this presentation, we will use these terms interchangeably.

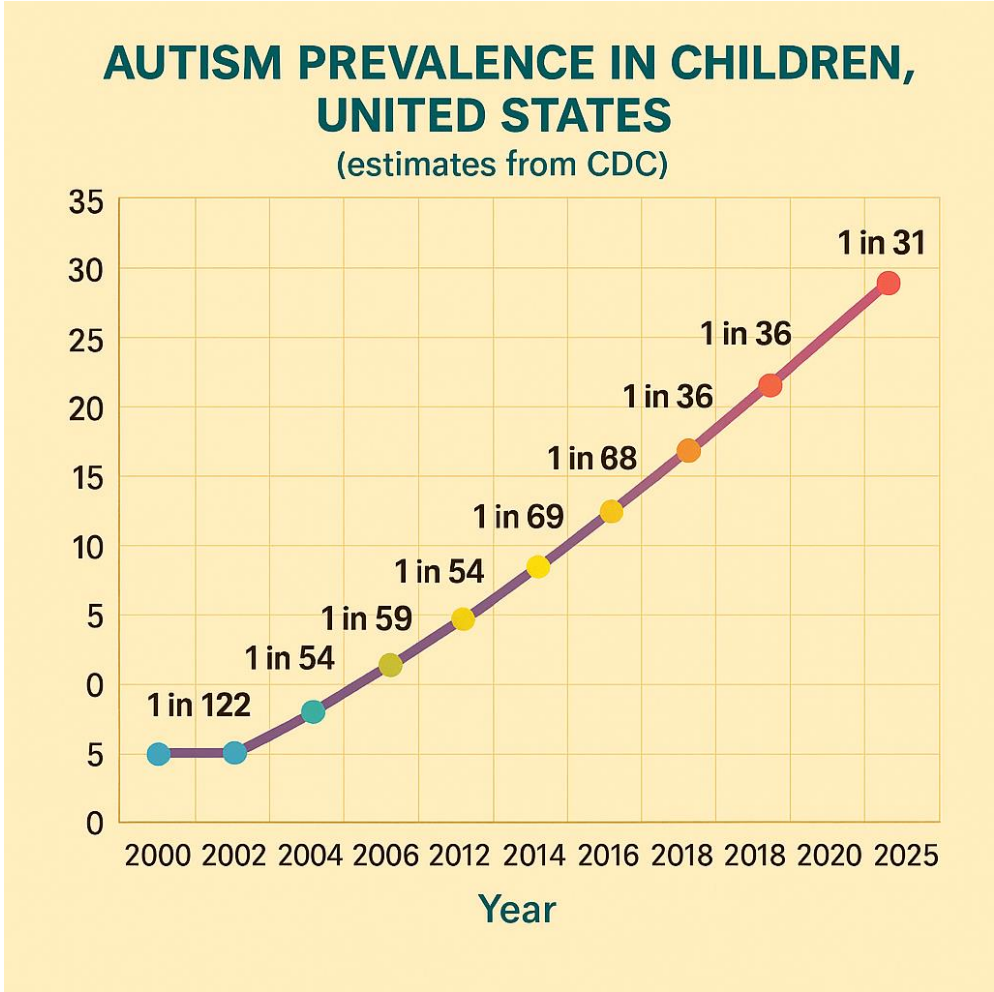
*Rule of Thumb: Ask for Preferences



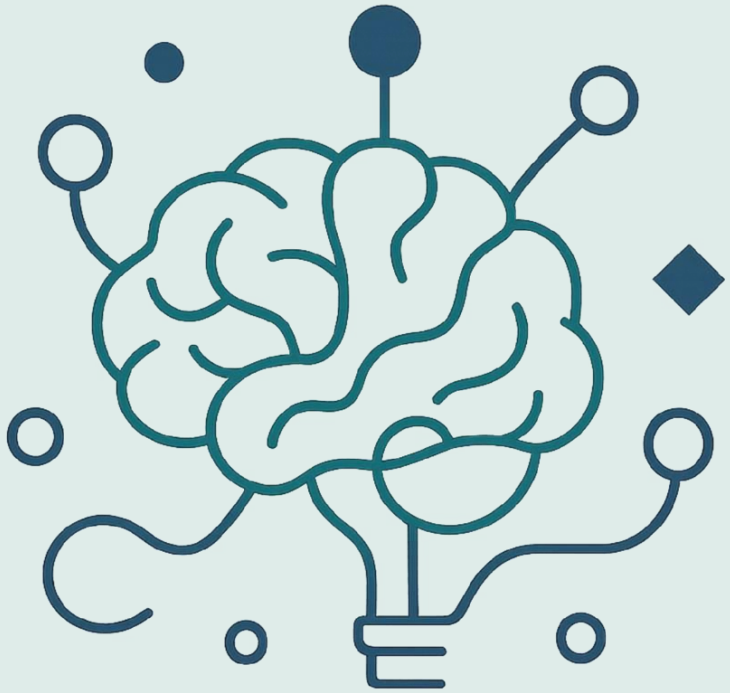
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Why This Conversation Matters

- Rising autism prevalence
- Increasing support complexity
- Adapting postsecondary systems
- Evidence-based practice

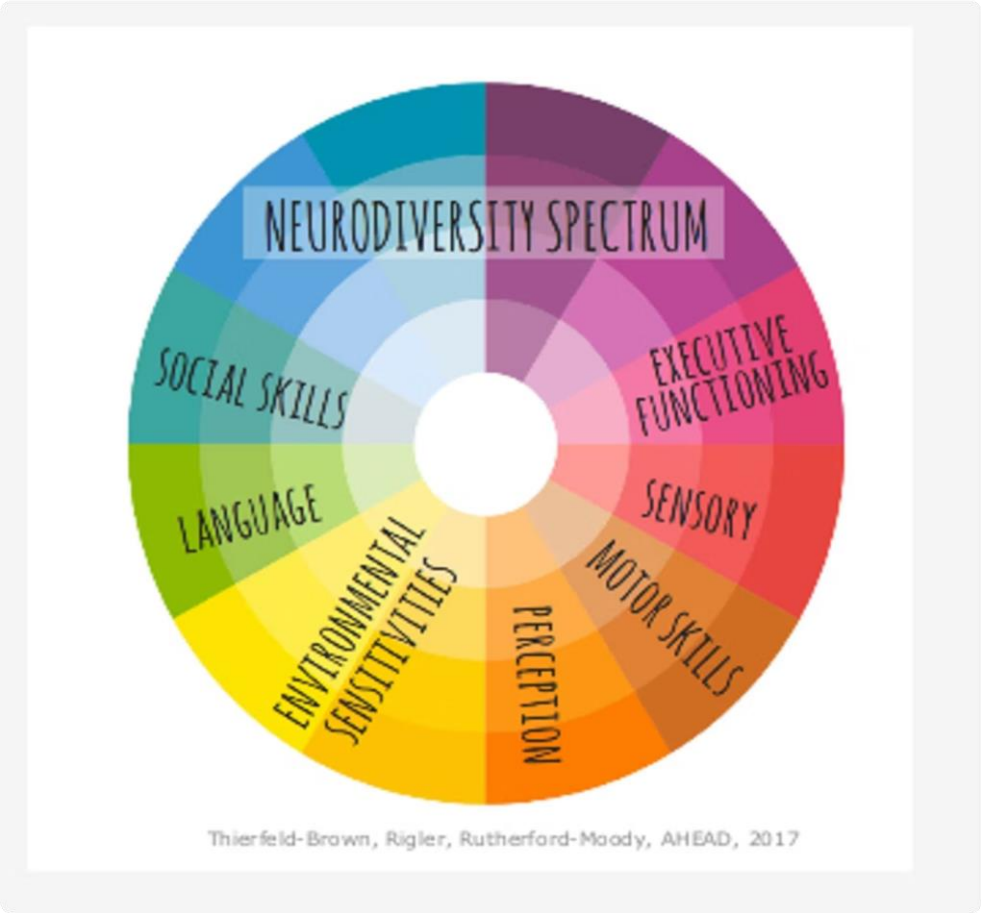


https://autimates.com/autism-in-2025-1-in-every-31-children-in-the-u-s/



Foundations of Neurodiversity

Understanding neurodivergent students and the unique strengths and Impacts within academics and campus life.



The Neurodiversity Spectrum

Neurodivergence is not a single trait

- Executive Functioning
- Sensory Processing
- Motor Skills & Perception
- Language & Social Skills
- Environmental Sensitivities

COMMON NEURODIVERGENT IMPACTS

- **Communication Differences:** Unique styles of expressing ideas; directness or delays may be misunderstood.
- **Different Socialization:** Social norms, unspoken rules, and group dynamics may feel confusing or draining, leading to masking or withdrawal.
- **Sensory Sensitivities:** Overwhelm from noise, light, or other environmental factors can impact focus and energy.
- **Time Management:** Losing track of time, underestimating how long tasks take, or hyperfocusing on one area.

COMMON NEURODIVERGENT IMPACTS

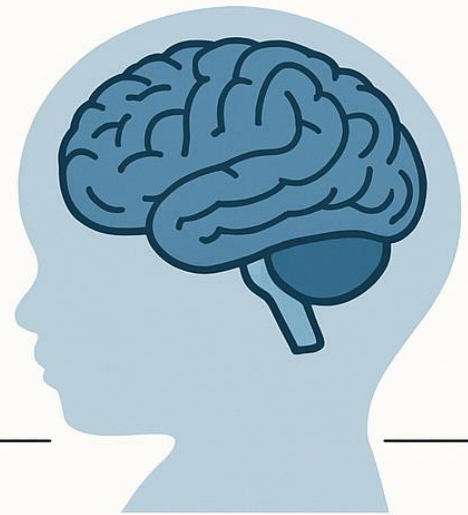
- **Emotional Regulation:** Strong emotional responses and difficulty shifting gears after frustration or disappointment.
- **Cognitive Flexibility:** Trouble adapting to sudden changes or seeing multiple perspectives quickly.
- **Executive Functioning Challenges:** Difficulty breaking down large tasks, prioritizing, or managing deadlines. (Note: we will cover this area more in depth later.)
- **Need for Routine:** A predictable routine will often provide stability.



PRENATAL BRAIN CHANGES IN AUTISM

ABNORMAL CORTICAL DEVELOPMENT

- Disorganized cortical layers
- Increased gyrification



OVERGROWTH AND CELL PROLIFERATION

- Early brain overgrowth
- Abnormal head circumference growth

GENE EXPRESSION IN FETAL BRAIN

Autism-associated genes expressed during mid-gestation

PRENATAL IMMUNE ACTIVATION

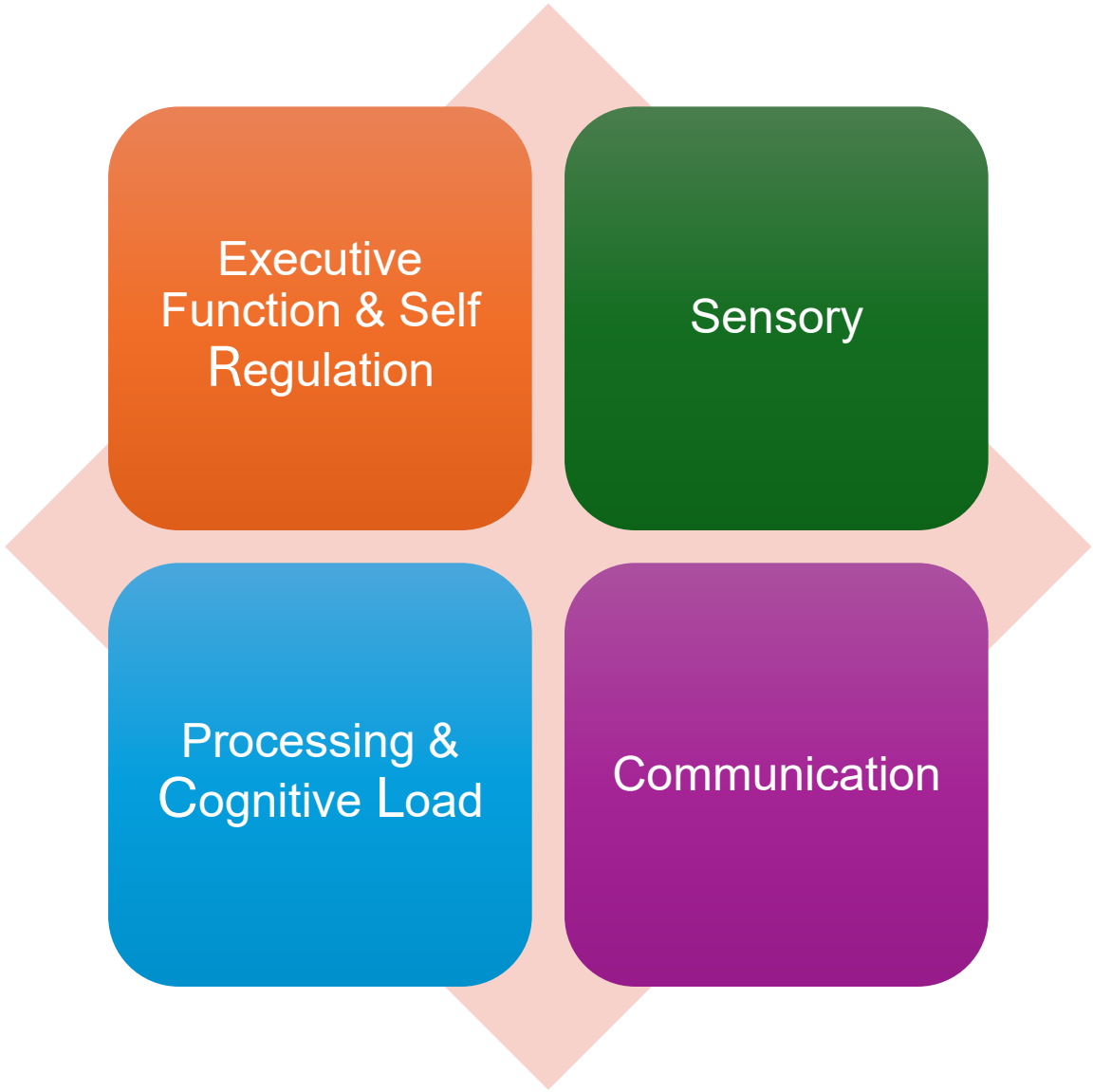
- Maternal immune activation
- Animal models show altered cortical structure

DISRUPTED CELL DIFFERENTIATION AND CONNECTIVITY

- Laminar disorganization
- Atypical axon guidance and synaptogenesis

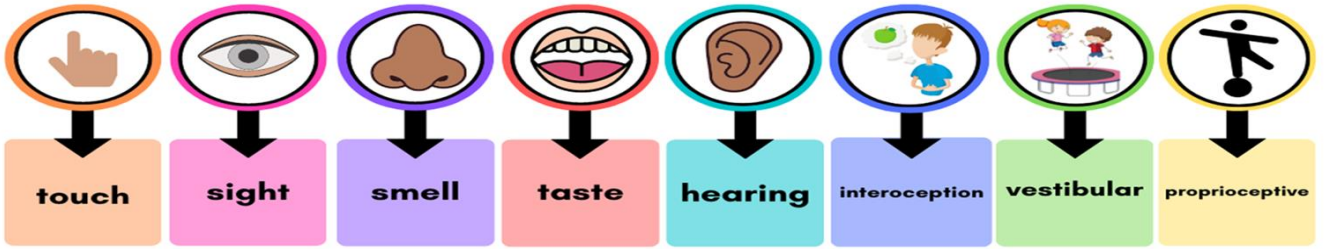
CHANGES VERY EARLY IN FETAL DEVELOPMENT

The Autistic Brain



Sensory

- **Sensory over- or under-responsivity**
- **Affects emotional regulation**
- **Impacts attention**
- **Influences social interaction**
- **Challenges daily functioning**
- **Overload increases stress**



Heightened or reduced sensitivity to environmental stimuli (sound, light, touch, taste, movement) as well as internal (proprioception, enteroception, pain)

Sensory Findings

Sensory Differences Can Impact:

- **Emotional regulation** — overload raises the stress baseline
- **Attention** — sensory noise competes with cognitive focus
- **Social interaction** — crowded or loud settings increase withdrawal
- **Daily functioning** — at school, at home, and in between

Overload increases stress and anxiety. Supportive sensory environments improve engagement and learning for all students

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Emotional Regulation

What Impacts Regulation:

- Emotional regulation can be impacted by sensory overload, uncertainty, social demands, and executive functioning challenges.

What Strong Reactions Really Mean:

- Strong emotional reactions are often a response to stress, overwhelm, or unmet support needs often not a lack of motivation or effort.
- Regulation looks different for different students and may require individualized strategies.

What Helps:

- Predictability, autonomy, and supportive relationships can help students regulate more effectively.

Activity: Cognitive Load



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Common Signs of Dysregulation

Withdrawal or Avoidance

Pulling back from participation, class, or social settings without explanation.

Increased Irritability

Lower-than-usual frustration tolerance; snapping or becoming easily upset.

Difficulty Initiating Tasks

Paralysis around starting assignments, emails, or daily routines.

Shutting Down

Going silent or disengaging mid-conversation, especially during conflict or overwhelm.

“Why Does It Seem Students are Less Prepared?”

“New systems” Independent living, medication management, hygiene, communication, academic skills, etc. Relearning some of the basics.

“Supports never let them” The transition from high school to college is incredibly difficult due to different laws (success vs. access), different scheduling, the need for independence, etc.

“No one ever told me” Different behavioral expectations in college need to be outlined clearly as there is no manifestation determination in college. All students are held to the same standard.

“Demands are much higher” Students are coming in with high levels of mental health impacts and lower levels of resilience. In talking with other disability resource professionals from around the country, this seems to be a national trend.

“Wait what day is it?” Coming back from holidays, semester breaks, even the dreaded snow days.

High School vs. College vs. Work

High School

- 5–6 hours/day of structured classes
- ~2 hours/day of homework
- Frequent quizzes; non-cumulative tests
- Teachers teach from textbooks
- 20–25 students per class
- One building; familiar environment
- Parents can advocate; modifications allowed

College

- 4–5 courses; 3–4 hours/week per class
- ~2 hours of prep per hour in class
- 2–3 cumulative exams per semester
- Research and primary sources required
- 10–300 students per course
- Entire campus to navigate
- Student self-advocates; no modifications

Work

- 8 hours/day, 5 days/week
- ~2 weeks vacation (no summers off)
- Performance evaluations and feedback cycles
- Varied supervision styles
- Team dynamics and workplace culture
- Disclosure decisions have new stakes

Different Ways of Thinking



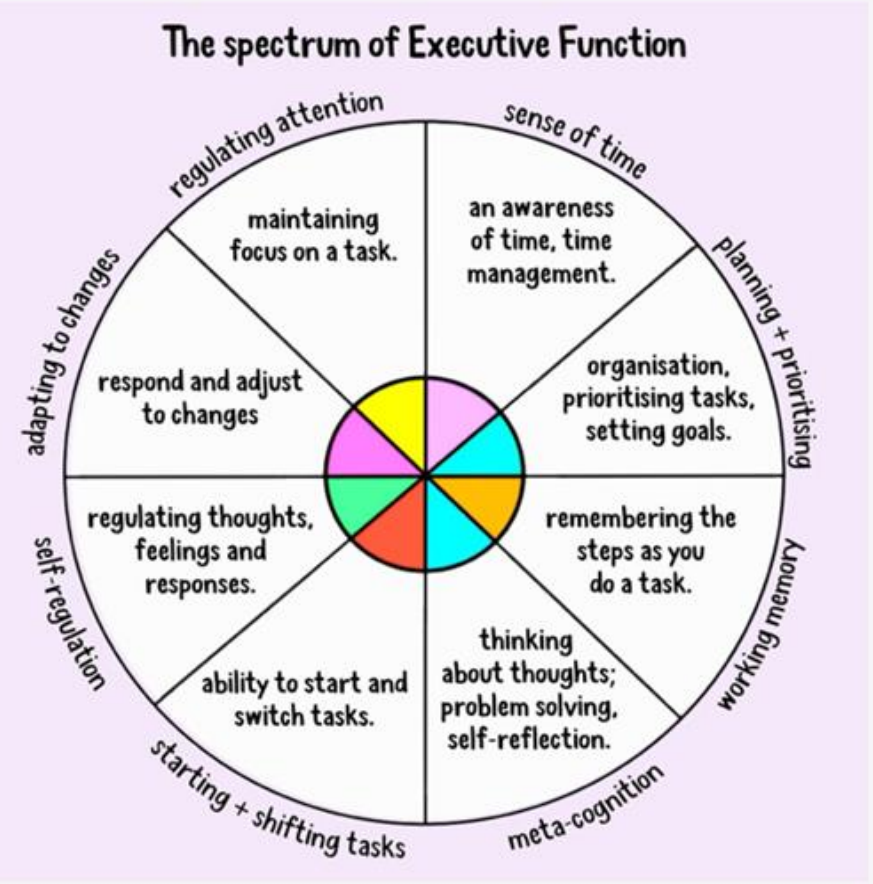
Students may…

- Have very strong interests in things others don’t understand
- Be great problem-solvers or pay close attention to detail.
- Need longer to process information
- Have Impacts with executive functioning
- Struggle to understand the impact on others

Different Ways of Communicating

- Communication may involve…
  - Speaking using echolalia (repeating other words)
  - Scripting out responses
  - Use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)
  - Variation in understanding and expressing sarcasm, idioms, tone, and body language
- Communication differences do not indicate lower intelligence

Executive Functioning



Complex mental processes & cognitive abilities like:

- Working memory,
- Impulse inhibition &
- Reasoning.

That control the skills such as:

- Organizing tasks,
- Remembering details,
- Managing time &
- Solving problems.

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Executive Functioning

- Planning, organization, initiation, shifting attention, working memory

- Because EF differs:
  - Visual schedules
  - External scaffolds
  - Predictable routines
  - Offer choices and flexibility

Let’s consider what you needed to do to participate with us today…

- When did you learn about our session? How did you note the date and time? How did you remember it as time passed?
- What Systems do you have to check to get updates?
- How did you schedule around this as a shift from your routine Thursday?
- How are you regulating your emotions while you’re here?
- What is keeping you engaged right now?
- If your pone battery dies before lunch, what would you do?
- How would you manage if we moved the afternoon slot to another time?



Cognitive Load & Pace

- Resources taxed by EF, sensory and social demands;
- Stress & multitasking reduce performance

- Because managing cognitive load differs:
  - Check cognitive load before increasing expectations
  - Teach energy management strategies
  - Break down complex tasks (chunk work)
  - Written instructions
  - Routine & preview
  - Reduce distractions

Self Regulation

- Emotional reactivity to events; motivation & perseverance

- Because self regulation differs:
  - Identify triggers and early warning signs (5 point scale)
  - Teach emotional awareness
  - Practice recovery strategies
  - Allow movement breaks

Sensory Processing

- Under or over reaction to internal & external sensory stimulation

- Because sensory processing differs:
  - Modify environments
  - Reduce sensory overload
  - Sensory tools
  - Sensory rooms

Can you match a brain difference to a challenge on your campus?



Understanding the Brain Isn't Enough

Students don't experience autism/adhd/anxiety - in isolation

Barriers in our campus systems:

- Meetings
- Relationships/ Hierarchies
- Policies
- Physical environment

Understanding Is Only the Beginning

Understanding neurology does not automatically create accessible campuses/course/experience

- Students do not experience impacts in isolation
- Experiences occur within systems
- Campus structures can either reduce or intensify barriers

Building Neuro-Affirming Practices

Neuro-Inclusive Campus Design



Universal Design Principles

Proactively designing programs, spaces, and services to be accessible from the start rather than retrofitting for individual needs.



Communication Clarity

Using plain language, explicit expectations, and multi-modal messaging to reduce ambiguity and misunderstanding.



Psychological Safety

Building cultures where students feel safe to disclose, ask for help, and be themselves without fear of judgment or mischaracterization.



Reducing Cognitive Load

Simplifying processes, eliminating unnecessary complexity, and offering structured guidance across all campus touchpoints.



Sensory Considerations

Thoughtfully addressing lighting, noise, crowding, and spatial design to minimize sensory barriers across campus environments.



Inclusive Policies & Procedures

Revising institutional policies to reflect neurodivergent realities and remove systemic barriers embedded in standard practice.

Neuroinclusive Practices: Communication

- Neuroinclusive communication reduces ambiguity, lowers cognitive load, and makes expectations more usable.

Key Strategies:

- Clear, direct, concrete language
- Written follow-up after meetings
- Explicit timelines, expectations, and next steps
- Reduced ambiguity in campus processes
- Consistent messaging across offices
- Multiple ways to receive information when possible

Examples

- Sending a written summary after appointments
- Meetings include concrete explanations of expectations and outcomes
- Communication avoids vague language like “participate more” or “be professional” without clarification

Flexible & Neuroinclusive Communication Practices

- Miscommunication drives a significant portion of conflict involving neurodivergent students.
- Recent research highlights communication mismatches (not intentional misconduct) as frequent escalation points.

The Explicitness Framework

Encourage departments to ask:

Are we relying on:

- Implied expectations?
- Tone interpretation?
- Social nuance?

Or are we providing:

- Clear written expectations?
- Examples of acceptable participation?
- Transparent grading criteria?

Flexible & Neuroinclusive Communication Practices

Multi-Modal Communication Policy

- Implement standard practice. For high-stakes communication, provide:
  - Verbal explanation
  - Written summary
  - Visual flow chart (if process-heavy)

- Example: After a meeting or at the end of a class provide a written summary outlining:
  - What was discussed
  - What decisions were made
  - What steps happen next
  - Who to contact
- This reduces executive functioning strain and anxiety.

Flexible & Neuroinclusive Communication Practices

Regulation-Aware Interactions

Train faculty/staff to recognize that dysregulation ≠ defiance.

Indicators of dysregulation:

- Shutdown
- Monotone or flat affect
- Escalating repetition
- Visible overwhelm

Response tools:

- Lower stimulation
- Reduce language volume
- Offer written follow-up
- Avoid public confrontation

This reduces unnecessary disciplinary escalation.

Neuroinclusive Practices: Environment

- Neuroinclusive environments reduce unnecessary sensory, social, and navigational barriers.

Key Strategies:

- Sensory-informed spaces
- Attention to transitions and predictability
- Clear signage and navigational supports
- Flexibility around environmental stress points
- Thoughtful design of physical and social spaces

Examples Across Campus

- Quiet waiting or testing options
- Reduced visual/auditory clutter where feasible
- Advance information about what to expect in appointments or events
- Events offering quieter spaces or decompression options
- Campus offices considering lighting, noise, crowding, and unpredictability

Sensory-Informed Environmental Design

Campus Sensory Scan Checklist

Research on neurodivergent college students consistently identifies sensory overload as a barrier to participation. Yet sensory barriers are often invisible in policy discussions. Encourage every department to conduct a brief environmental audit using this framework.



Lighting

- Is there fluorescent flicker or harsh overhead lighting?
- Can lights be adjusted or dimmed when needed?
- Are there areas with natural light available?



Sound

- Are rooms echo-heavy or acoustically challenging?
- Are there sudden alarms, announcements, or loud HVAC?
- Is there constant background noise that cannot be reduced?



Space & Layout

- Are seating arrangements crowded or unpredictable?
- Are there no low-stimulation areas for decompression?
- Is wayfinding clear and consistent throughout the building?

Sensory-Informed Environmental Design

Sensory Support Micro-Adjustments

Low-cost, high-impact strategies:

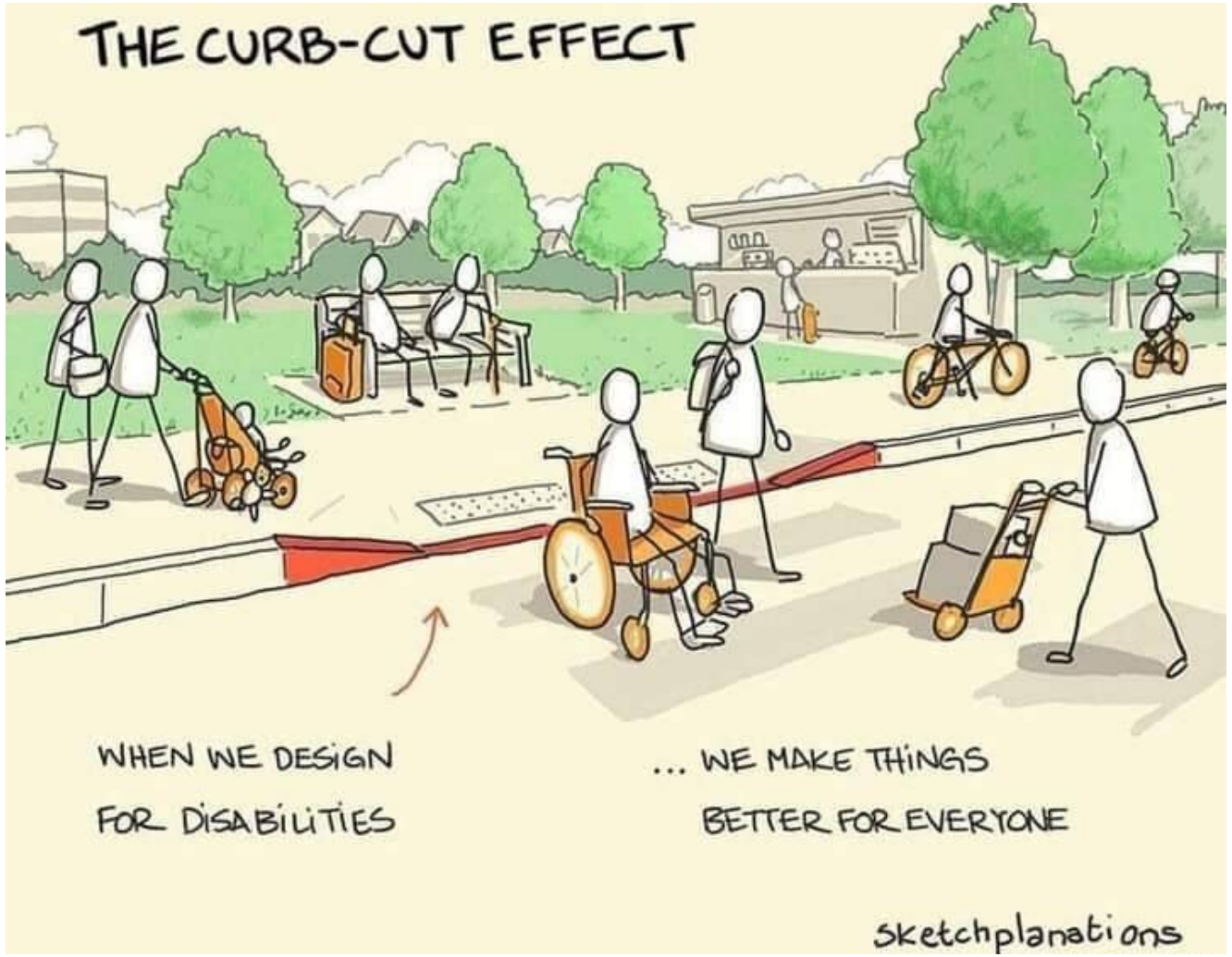
- Advance event descriptions (“Music will be loud; 150+ people expected”)
- Designated decompression spaces
- Clear signage
- Predictable event structure

Sensory-informed design benefits:

- Autistic students
- Students with PTSD
- ADHD students
- Students with migraines
- Students with anxiety

Incorporating Universal Design

- Promote a welcoming climate for ***all***
- Make learning interactive
- Consider access the physical environment and course materials
- Use multiple delivery methods and/or multiple formats for materials
- Explore and make sure content is accessible
- Offer clear and direct feedback
- Provide access through accommodations



Common Barriers & UDL Solutions

Campus Area	Common Barrier	UDL Strategy	Benefit
Orientation	Information overload	Schedules in advance; visual maps	Reduces anxiety and increases preparedness
Advising	Difficulty retaining verbal information	Structured agendas; written summary emails	Improves understanding and follow-through
Housing	Unclear expectations	Visual guides; multiple communication methods	Supports successful transitions
Financial Aid	Complex multi-step processes	Checklists; video tutorials	Increases access to critical information
Conduct	Uncertainty about procedures	Visual timelines; plain language explanations	Improves transparency and reduces anxiety
Career Services	Limited access to preparation resources	Recorded workshops; flexible participation	Expands engagement opportunities
Campus Events	Sensory and social challenges	Advance agendas; quiet decompression spaces	Creates more inclusive experiences
Classrooms	Variable learning needs	Multiple ways to access and demonstrate learning	Improves learning outcomes for all
Libraries & Academic Support	Difficulty navigating resources independently	Research guides; recorded tutorials	Increases student independence
Recreation & Dining	Sensory and communication barriers	Clear signage; accessible information	Enhances participation and comfort

Understanding Is Only the Beginning

Understanding autistic neurology does not automatically create accessible campuses

- Students do not experience autism in isolation
- They experience autism within systems
- Campus structures can either reduce or intensify barriers

Transition Differences: Disability Legal Systems

High school and post-secondary laws differ → students, faculty, and staff navigate access in different ways in college

	IDEA	ADA
Type of Law	Education, Entitlement	Civil rights statute, Eligibility
Responsibility	Parent and school	Student
Ensures	Success	Equal Access
Services	Evaluation, remediation, special accommodations	Reasonable accommodations
Focus	Diagnostic label	Level of functional impairment
Disability	One of 13 categories	Impairment in major life activity

Reasonable Accommodations

Accommodations…

- Provide an alternative way to participate and meet requirements by **reducing/removing barriers**
- Do not compromise essential course elements, weaken academic standards, or conduct codes
- Offer a level playing field, not an unfair advantage

a reasonable accommodation is a modification or adjustment to a course, program, service, job, facility, or activity that enables a qualified person with a disability to have an equal opportunity to participate.

Faculty and Student Rights and Obligations (R&O)

Faculty: R&O

- To receive letters of accommodation (LOA) for students who request them
- To consult with disability specialists
- To implement accommodations requested through LOAs
- To receive support
- Prevent & report discrimination
- Not be discriminated against

Students: R&O

- To maintain privacy around their disability and disability status by choice
- To access instruction, activities, and assessments
- To communicate with faculty about their needs around accommodations
- To receive support
- Not be discriminated against
- Comply with conduct code

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COMMON IMPACTS/EXPERIENCES



Communication

Unique ways of expressing ideas.



Social Navigation

Unspoken rules and social confusion.



Sensory Processing

Overwhelm from noise, light, and stimuli.



Time Awareness

Difficulties managing time and tasks.



Emotional Processing

Intense feelings and shifting moods.



Adaptability

Challenges with sudden changes.



Executive Function

Struggles with organization and planning.

Accommodations Process Can Be Challenging

Audience Poll: What difficult request do you have coming in?

PEACES WAVE 3 FINDINGS – ROLE OF DSOS

- Autistic students, on average, viewed DSOs as representing a **5.04** in terms of their importance in their success (on a 7-point Likert scale); in essence, this was ranked **11th** out of 25 items regarding importance.
- **68%** of autistic college students were registered with their DSO
- Brett Nachman PEACES

Many Campus Systems Assume…

- Comfort with ambiguity
- Strong self-advocacy
- Mastery of social skills
- Tolerance for unpredictability
- Independent executive functioning

Self Regulated People

(see Wolf & Kaplan, 2008)

- Use strategies
- Set goals
- Monitor & allocate resources
- Direct learning & life
- Access supports
- Exercise personal choice
- Use self regulatory systems

Neuroinclusive Practices: Culture

- Neuroinclusive culture shapes whether students feel merely accommodated or genuinely understood and included.

Key Strategies

- Moving away from deficit-based interpretations
- Improving disability literacy across units
- Building shared responsibility instead of siloed ownership
- Increasing psychological safety for disclosure and help-seeking
- Supporting belonging without forced conformity
- Treating disability as part of diversity, campus climate, and institutional belonging work

Examples Across Campus

- Staff trained to distinguish distress from defiance
- Faculty and student affairs staff learning not to misread direct communication as disrespect
- Campus messaging that frames neurodivergence as part of human diversity rather than

Supporting Autistic Students on Campus: Scenario-Based Learning

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What to Expect:

- Exploring scenarios through discussion
- Goal: Recognize and apply the knowledge that we have learned so far today
- Note: Any laughter is not directed at the students.

Scenario: "Jordan"

Jordan is a first-year student who is intelligent, engaged in class discussions, and expresses excitement about their career goals. However, they frequently miss advising appointments, submit forms after deadlines, and often start assignments the night before they are due.

When advisors ask about their progress, Jordan responds, "I know I need to do it—I just haven't gotten around to it yet," and appears unaware of how their delays affect faculty, staff, and their own academic standing.

Some faculty describe Jordan as unmotivated, irresponsible, or disengaged. Jordan, however, reports feeling overwhelmed by where to start, loses track of deadlines, and struggles to prioritize tasks when multiple demands compete for attention.

Understanding Procrastination

For many neurodivergent students — particularly those with ADHD, anxiety, or autism — procrastination is not a motivation problem. It is an **executive functioning challenge**. Difficulty with task initiation, time blindness, perfectionism, and emotional regulation all contribute to patterns that look like avoidance from the outside but feel like paralysis from the inside.



Time Blindness

Difficulty perceiving time passing or estimating how long tasks will take — making planning and prioritization genuinely hard, not just a bad habit.



Task Initiation

The activation energy required to begin a task can be disproportionately high, even when the student wants to complete the work and understands its importance.



Perfectionism & Fear of Failure

All-or-nothing thinking can make starting feel impossible when the risk of imperfection looms larger than the benefit of completion.



Emotional Regulation

Overwhelm, frustration, or anxiety can temporarily block cognitive access to planning and follow-through — even in students who are highly capable.

Understanding Working Memory

working memory impacts are not a matter of intelligence, effort, or attention. Working memory is the ability to hold, manipulate, and use information in the moment. When working memory is overloaded, students may appear forgetful, disorganized, inattentive, or disengaged, despite actively trying to keep up.



Following Multi- Step Directions:

Holding several pieces of information in mind at once can be difficult, making complex instructions, registration processes, or advising conversations harder to navigate without written supports.



Information Retrieval Under Stress:

Stress, anxiety, and cognitive overload can temporarily reduce access to information a student knows well, resulting in blanking on details, forgetting commitments, or struggling to recall next steps.



Task Tracking and Follow Through:

Students may intend to complete a task but lose track of it when competing demands arise. Missed deadlines, forgotten appointments, or incomplete forms often reflect difficulties maintaining information over time rather than a lack of responsibility..



Cognitive Load and Mental Fatigue:

Managing academic, social, and daily living demands requires significant mental effort. Students with working memory challenges may expend substantial cognitive energy simply keeping track of information, leaving fewer resources available for problem-solving, learning, and self-advocacy.

Understanding Organization and Task Management:

organization involves a complex set of executive functioning skills. Difficulties with planning, prioritization, sequencing, and tracking information can make managing responsibilities challenging, even when students are highly capable and motivated.



Prioritization:

Determining which task should be completed first can be difficult when multiple responsibilities feel equally important, urgent, or overwhelming.



Managing Multiple Demands

Balancing coursework, appointments, employment, social commitments, and daily living tasks can place heavy demands on executive functioning systems. Important responsibilities may be unintentionally overlooked as new demands arise.



Planning and Sequencing

Breaking large projects into manageable steps and creating realistic timelines may require significant cognitive effort. Students may struggle to identify where to begin or how to move from one step to the next.



Creating and Maintaining Systems

Many students understand the value of planners, calendars, and organizational tools but may have difficulty consistently using and updating them. The challenge often lies not in knowing what strategy to use, but in sustaining the routines that make the strategy effective.

Understanding Motivation:

motivation is not simply a matter of effort, willpower, or desire. Executive functioning differences can affect how the brain prioritizes, initiates, and sustains effort toward tasks. Students may care deeply about their goals while still struggling to translate intention into action.



Interest-Based Attention:

Some students are more able to engage with tasks that feel meaningful, novel, urgent, or rewarding. Tasks that lack immediate relevance may require significantly more cognitive effort to begin and sustain.



Task Initiation Barriers:

Students may know exactly what needs to be done but struggle to activate the mental processes required to begin. This can be mistaken for a lack of motivation when it is actually difficulty accessing the starting point.



Reward Processing

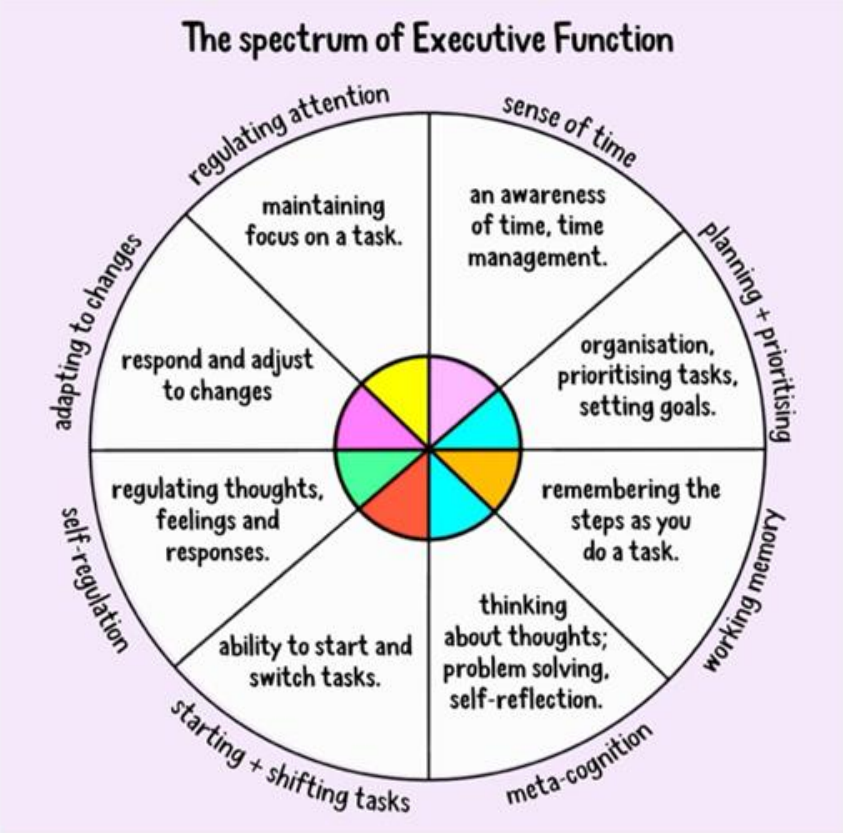
Future outcomes, such as grades or long-term career goals, may not provide enough immediate reinforcement to drive action. The importance of a task may be fully understood without creating the momentum needed to start.



Mental and Emotional Energy

Managing academic demands, social expectations, sensory environments, and self-regulation can consume substantial cognitive resources. What appears to be low motivation may reflect depleted capacity rather than a lack of interest or commitment

Executive Functioning



Complex mental processes & cognitive abilities like:

- Working memory,
- Impulse inhibition &
- Reasoning.

That control the skills such as:

- Organizing tasks,
- Remembering details,
- Managing time &
- Solving problems.

Scenario: "Maya"

Maya is a second-year student who has generally performed well academically. During office hours, she arrives visibly tense after receiving disappointing exam results earlier that day.

When her professor begins discussing the exam results, Maya becomes increasingly frustrated. She interrupts several times, raises her voice, and responds with comments such as, "None of this matters if I'm already failing," and "No one understands how much I'm trying."

As the conversation continues, Maya struggles to process information being shared. She appears defensive, rejects suggestions that she would normally consider, and eventually leaves the meeting abruptly.

Later that week, Maya emails her professor apologizing for her behavior and expresses embarrassment about how she responded. She shares that she felt overwhelmed, exhausted, and unable to think clearly during the meeting.

Responding to Common Impacts



Potential Trigger	Supportive Response
Unexpected change	Provide advance notice whenever possible; offer alternatives and explain the reason for the change clearly
Sensory overload	Offer access to a quieter space or a scheduled break; reduce environmental stimulation before re-engaging
Information overload	Break information into smaller sequential steps; check for understanding and offer written follow-up
Social fatigue	Allow time to recharge before continuing interaction; normalize the need for breaks in high-demand settings
High stress or anxiety	Use clear, concrete, calm communication; avoid ambiguity, ultimatums, or social pressure in the moment

Scenario: "Alex"

Alex is a first-year student who receives an email from an advisor that states:

"You should start thinking about next semester soon. Be sure to get everything taken care of before registration opens.“

Alex reads the email and assumes there is nothing that requires immediate action. How can you plan for next semester before you are done with the classes you are in No specific deadlines, steps, or expectations are provided.

Several weeks later, Alex learns that they have missed an important advising requirement needed to register for classes. When contacted by the advising office, Alex appears confused and frustrated, stating, "I didn't know I was supposed to do anything yet.“

Staff members express concern that Alex is not checking emails carefully or taking responsibility for important tasks. Alex, however, shares that they believed they were following instructions as written and did not realize additional action was expected.

During a follow-up conversation, it becomes clear that Alex benefits from direct communication, explicit next steps, and advance notice of upcoming changes. Once provided with a clear checklist and timeline, Alex completes the remaining requirements successfully.

"Alex“ Communication Breakdown

Potential Impacts on the Student

Missed deadlines, appointments, or registration requirements
Increased anxiety and uncertainty about expectations
Reduced confidence in navigating college systems
Hesitation to seek help due to fear of making mistakes
Perception of being unsuccessful despite genuine effort
Increased cognitive load spent interpreting expectations rather than completing tasks

What May Actually Be Happening

Expectations were implied rather than explicitly stated.
Key actions, deadlines, and next steps were not clearly communicated.
Ambiguous language required Alex to infer meaning that was never directly provided.
Uncertainty increased stress and reduced confidence in decision-making.

Communication Strategies

Use Plain Language
State exactly what action is required.
Avoid vague phrases such as "take care of this soon" or "you should start thinking about."
Provide Clear Next Steps
Break processes into manageable actions.
Use checklists whenever possible.
Increase Predictability
Share timelines and deadlines early.
Explain what will happen next and when.
Reduce Guesswork
Make implicit expectations explicit.
Define unfamiliar terms, processes, and requirements.
Follow Up in Multiple Formats
Pair verbal conversations with written summaries.
Provide reference materials students can revisit later.

What is Plain Language?

"A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can readily find what they need, understand it, and use it."

https://www.plainlanguage.gov/

Educational use only. Sara Sanders Gardner

Example

Before

The student applicant should be sure to be on time, and submit an official copy of his or her transcript, two letters of recommendation from professors, a statement of financial need, and a short biographical statement to our grants' office by April 15

After

To apply, submit the following items to our grants office by April 15:

- An official copy of your transcript
- Two letters of recommendation from professors;
- A statement of financial need; and
- A short biographical statement.

Email to: grants@office.us *OR*
Fax to: 555.555.5555

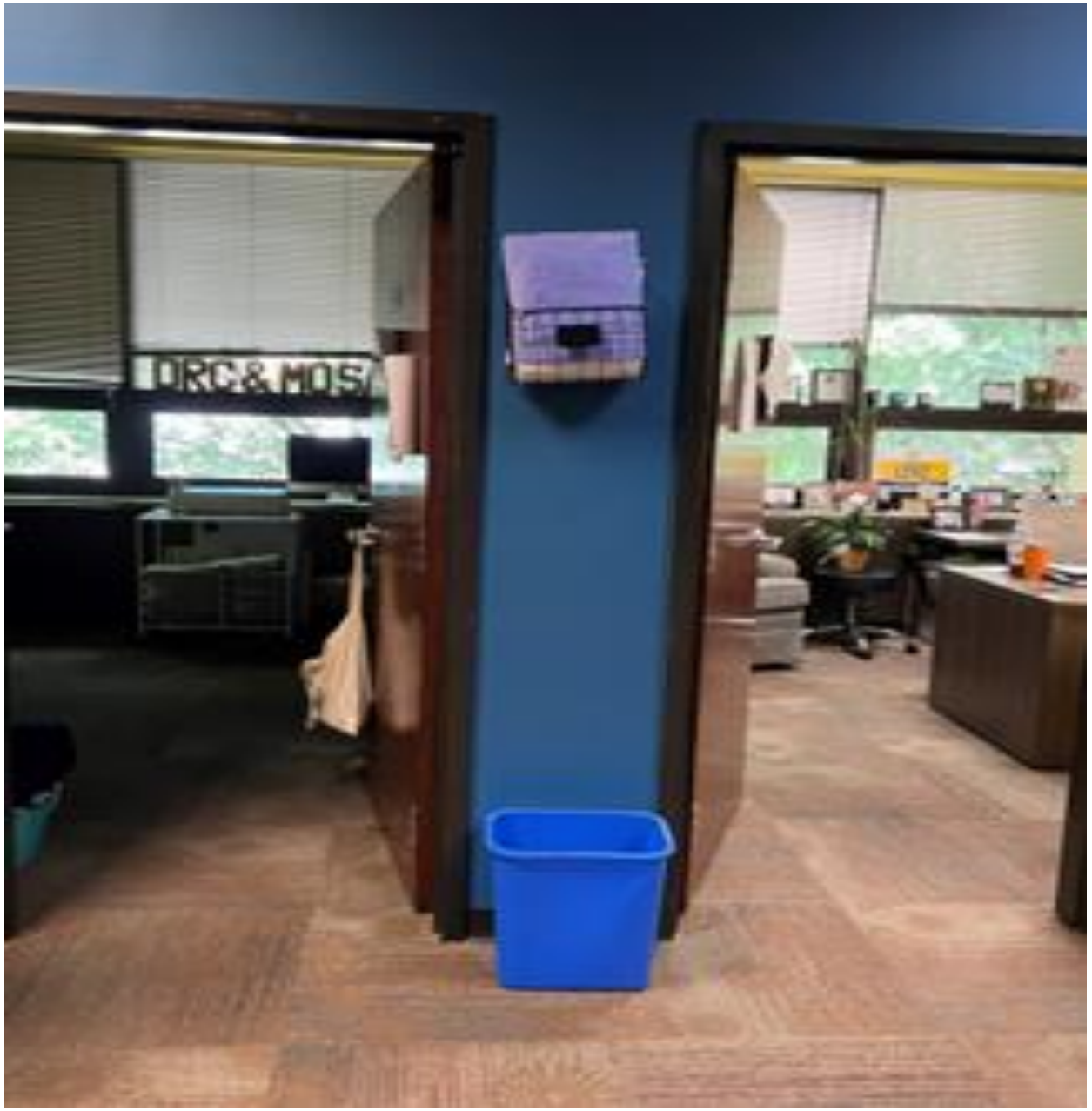
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Scenario: Literal Thinking

A student came running in after receiving a 0 on her final paper. She was in tears and very upset. Tears dripping down her face. She was unable to communicate clearly and pounding her hands on her head. When the staff member asked what was going on she could only articulate “My paper, my paper.” After further questioning the student said, “I worked so hard for nothing.”

Having worked with the student before, I was familiar with a prior version of the paper. On the syllabus, the professor noted the following submission instructions:

“Turn in final papers in the bin outside my office by 05/26/2026. No electronic submission will be accepted.”



Literal Thinking

Scenario: Class Disruption

Paul, a student in a lab, is constantly asking questions in class so that he knows the "why" behind the "why." At times, he is asking so many questions that it takes up about half of the class time. The professor is starting to feel defeated because other students in the class are negatively impacted by Paul's questions and feel like they don't have time to voice their own. Paul is deeply interested in lab sciences and wants to know all that he can about the topic.

The professor contacts the staff working with Paul to explain the situation and how he is becoming a distraction in the class. When confronted with this, Paul is confused and doesn't know or understand that this is an issue and doesn't know why classmates would be frustrated with him.

College Autism Spectrum 2026 DO NOT REPLICATE

Supporting Students

How We Help Students Navigate the Ecosystem

- Make campus roles and pathways more visible
- Break complex processes into clear steps
- Coach students before meetings and emails
- Provide written follow-up and concrete next steps
- Help students interpret confusing situations
- Reduce unnecessary self-advocacy burden through better coordination

Supporting Students

How We Support Self-Advocacy

- Frame self-advocacy as a skill
- Provide scaffolding, not all-or-nothing independence
- Use templates, prompts, and guided practice
- Help students name needs, barriers, and preferences*
- Center student voice while staying available for support

- Goal isn't to leave students alone with the system. It's to help them navigate it with increasing confidence while also making the system easier to use.

College Autism Spectrum 2026 DO NOT REPLICATE

Why Systems Change Matters

Many campuses begin with genuine commitment to supporting neurodivergent students — but stall at the level of individual accommodation rather than systemic redesign. Understanding the gap between compliance and culture is essential to creating lasting change.

Culture vs. Compliance

Compliance means meeting minimum legal requirements. Culture means embedding inclusion into values, training, hiring, and everyday decision-making. Compliance without culture produces inconsistent, performative support that students quickly learn to distrust.

Institutional Barriers

Common systemic barriers include siloed departments, insufficient training, punitive conduct frameworks, inaccessible communication, and physical environments designed without neurodivergent users in mind. These barriers are often invisible to those who don't experience them.

Institutional Strengths

Most campuses already have assets to build on: committed staff, existing UDL frameworks, disability services expertise, assessment infrastructure, and leadership interested in equity. Systems change starts by identifying and leveraging what already works.

Three UDL Themes Across Campus

Every UDL-informed strategy maps back to one of three core themes. These themes serve as a practical organizing framework for designing more neuroinclusive programs and services.

Representation

How information is presented

- Visual maps and infographics
- Videos with captions
- Clear written instructions
- Recorded sessions for later review
- Multiple formats for every high-stakes communication

Action & Expression

How people participate

- Multiple ways to engage in programs and services
- Flexible communication options (email, in-person, asynchronous)
- Different ways to demonstrate knowledge or engagement
- Virtual and in-person participation as true equivalents

Engagement

How people connect and stay motivated

- Choice and flexibility built into campus programs
- Predictable structures that reduce anticipatory anxiety
- Sensory considerations designed in from the start
- Opportunities for self-directed involvement and contribution

Tool Kit & Resources

The following curated resources support neuroinclusive practice across campus — from plain language guidelines to UDL implementation tools, faculty development resources, and practical redesign frameworks. These are starting points, not endpoints.

Plain Language Guidelines

Federal plain language standards for writing clear, accessible communication that reduces cognitive load for all readers.

UDL at a Glance (5-min video) — CAST

A concise visual introduction to Universal Design for Learning — ideal for orienting new staff or faculty to UDL principles.

TILT: Transparency in Learning and Teaching — TILT Higher Ed

A research-backed framework for making assignment expectations explicit and equitable — particularly beneficial for neurodivergent and first-generation students.

Reasonable Accommodations Explained — APA Disability Resources Toolkit

A practical guide to understanding the legal and practical landscape of disability accommodations in higher education.

Neurodiversity Navigators Faculty Resources — Bellevue College

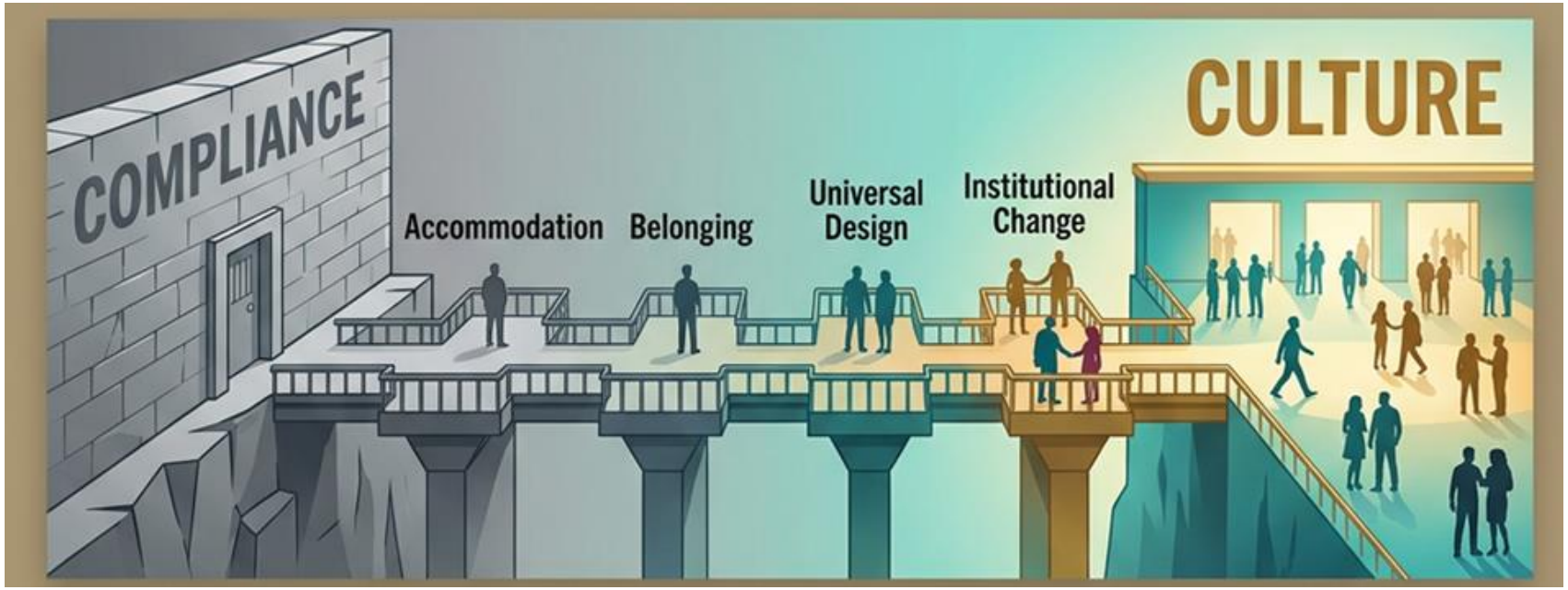
Faculty-facing guides developed by a leading neurodiversity program, covering communication, course design, and student support strategies.

Redesign or Accommodate — Accessibility Toolkit

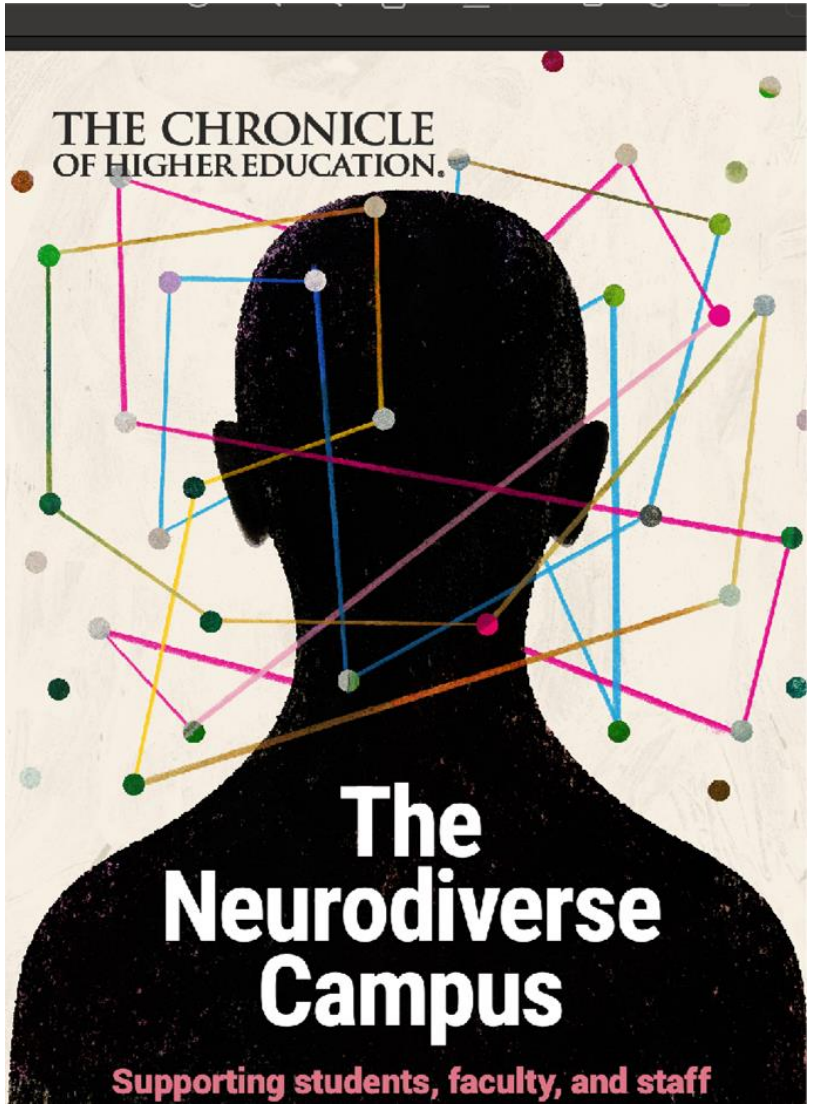
An activity guide that helps faculty and staff decide when to redesign a course element universally versus when to offer an individual accommodation.

Student Group Work — Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning

Evidence-based strategies for making collaborative learning more structured, equitable, and accessible for all students — including those who find unstructured group work challenging.


COMPLIANCE
Accommodation
Belonging
Universal Design
Institutional Change
CULTURE

Questions and Resource Sharing


THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION.
The Neurodiverse Campus
Supporting students, faculty, and staff

Tool Kit & Resources

- Plain Language
- UDL at a Glance (5 min video): CAST
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- Reasonable Accommodations Explained: APA Disability Resources Toolkit
- Neurodiversity Navigators Faculty Resources: Bellevue College, WA State
- Redesign or Accommodate: Accessibility Toolkit
- The Ever-Dreaded Discussion Board: Toolkit of Ideas from the State University of New York at Buffalo
- Student Group Work: Dartmouth Center for the Advancement of Learning

THANKS FOR COMING
Questions and Comments

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