



Neurodiversity in College Admissions

By Eric Endlich, PhD, IECA (CA)

I've noticed that when the topic of student diversity comes up during campus tours and information sessions, admissions officers usually focus on how many different states and countries are represented by the freshman class, and how many students of color will be attending. While these numbers matter, to be sure, there's rarely any mention of gender diversity, diversity of abilities, or *neurodiversity*.

Neurodiversity refers to the fact that our brains don't all work the same way, and that around 15-20 percent of us are neurodivergent, characterized by autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or other patterns outside the neurotypical mainstream. In contrast to the *medical model*, which views these diagnoses as forms of pathology to be prevented or treated, the *neurodiversity paradigm* suggests that *different* does not mean defective or inferior, but merely—well—different.

The neurodiversity paradigm is rooted in the *social model* of disability (Comberousse, 2019), which argues that disability is not inherent in the person, but rather a condition created by an environment

that is not sufficiently accommodating or supportive; wheelchair users, for example, may or may not be disabled from navigating a building, depending on the presence of ramps and elevators. One might argue that the very definition of an "ability" is in the eye of the beholder. Lack of eye contact, for instance, is often cited as a "symptom" of autism by neurotypical people who view eye contact as an essential component of nonverbal communication, but some cultures view eye contact quite differently (Uono & Hietanen, 2015).

Using the lens of neurodiversity, we can more easily appreciate the unique strengths of neurodivergent individuals and the benefits of neurodiversity inclusion. A few colleges have embraced this perspective, as evidenced by the Neurodiversity Center at Landmark College, the Stanford Neurodiversity Project, the Center for Neurodiversity at Rowan University, and the Neurodiversity Initiative at the College of William & Mary. A number of companies are also ahead of the curve, recognizing that great minds don't always

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think alike, and that diversity of thought is conducive to creativity and innovation. Companies with proactive neurodiversity hiring initiatives include Goldman Sachs, Ford, Microsoft, Dell, EY, JP Morgan, and Google.

Many people who are neurodivergent experience *intersectionality* because they belong to other minority groups as well. For example, there is a significant overlap between the autism community and the LGBTQ+ (especially trans and non-binary) community (George & Stokes, 2018). Students who belong to both identity groups sometimes feel doubly marginalized and are highly sensitive to issues of inclusion. They are often concerned about finding colleges where they'll feel safe and welcomed. If they also belong to a racial minority, these issues may be heightened further still.

As independent educational consultants (IECs), what role can we play in helping these students find a safe haven? First, I believe we need to convey to them that we not only respect, but celebrate, their differences. We can do this in many ways, including simple things like learning what pronouns and terminology they use. For example, most people on the spectrum prefer terms such as *autistic person*, known as “identity-first” language, to “person-first” terms such as *person with autism* (Organization for Autism Research, 2020).

Second, we can help students find inclusive schools using tools such as the College Equity Index (for Black students), the Campus Pride Index (for LGBTQ+ students) and the Top College Consultants list of neurodiversity-friendly colleges (topcollegeconsultants.com/autism-in-college). We can encourage them to attend colleges that

have neurodiversity clubs and LD support programs—or to start their own clubs if they're interested. Every time a family (or IEC) inquires during a tour about such clubs and programs, they are communicating to colleges what matters to them. These “votes” can send a powerful cumulative message.

Be advised, though, that the vast majority of students with learning differences who obtain special education services in high school do not register with disability services in college, and hence receive no special accommodations or services at all.

We, too, can send a message to colleges that diversity and inclusion matter to our students. Minority students are not the only ones who voice these concerns; I've met many white students, for example, who seek racially diverse campuses. When we attend information sessions, we can ask admissions officers what percentage of students are neurodivergent or have disclosed disabilities. Be advised, though, that the vast majority of students with learning differences who obtain special education services in high school do not register with disability services in college, and hence receive no special accommodations or services at all (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). Small wonder that their rate of graduation is markedly lower than that of their peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). By raising the visibility of neurodiversity, we have the potential to create more inclusive



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colleges that entice students not only to attend but also to be open or “out” about their differences in ways that allow them to get the social and academic support they need.

Jill Corbin, EdD, director of college and transition counseling at Denver Academy, agrees: “If I attend an information session or campus tour and the Office of Disability Services is not mentioned, I find a way to connect with the admissions staff to encourage them to highlight the ODS supports in future presentations. I am hopeful that by hearing this same suggestion from other counselors, the Office of Disability Services will be recognized and celebrated by the Office of Admissions in all of their messaging, further establishing an inclusive campus environment.”

There is a small but growing movement to establish identity-based campus *disability cultural centers* that create a sense of community, in contrast to traditional disability centers, which are staff-run and focused on providing accommodations and services (Herder, 2022). At the University of Washington, for example, The D Center, “one of a handful of centers run by and for university students with disabilities in North America...connects the UW community by providing both a physical space...to gather, study, relax, and meet one another and build community, while acting as a host for a number of events and programs which focus on issues pertaining to disability” (UW website). We can educate our students about this movement, which may even inspire them to persuade colleges to create more such centers.

Colleges are not fixed entities; they are constantly evolving, partly in response to “customer” demand. (Remember lazy rivers and

climbing walls?) We are in a unique position to empower students to find their voices, value their unique perspectives, and blaze a trail towards more inclusive college environments. 

Resources

Comberousse, S. (2019). A beginner's guide to neurodiversity. *Learning Disability Today*. learningdisabilitytoday.co.uk/a-beginners-guide-to-neurodiversity

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