

# Faculty Guide to Inclusive Practices for Neurodivergent Students

## WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

We discuss neurodiversity to encourage people to realize that learning, thinking and doing happen in many different ways, often in ways that we ourselves are not familiar with, but we can work to be more inclusive. In reality, it describes the totality of differentiation in neurological functioning.

## WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a word that we use to describe a person's differentiated experience of, and interactions with, our more neurotypical world. Those differences may include alternative ways of communicating (both receptively and expressively), differences in sensitivities to environmental stimuli (such as light and sound) and differences in how information is processed and acted upon.

## WHY DO WE NEED INCLUSIVE PRACTICES FOR NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS?

Neurodivergent students are learning in an environment that was not necessarily designed for the ways they interact with the world, which can present barriers to access. The following recommended practices can help to address barriers for neurodivergent students but can also help address personal needs across the student population.



## FOUR DOMAINS OF CLASSROOM INCLUSION

### SENSORY & PHYSICAL LOCATION

Many classrooms require students to sit quietly in one place. Some students are better able to focus when they can move (fidgeting or standing in the back of class, for example). External factors can also impact students' ability to focus. Some examples include construction and traffic.

### TIMING & STRUCTURE

Class structure management can help all students learn. Changes to class structure, such as a class running overtime, can be challenging for all students and especially for neurodivergent students. To help everyone learn better, it's crucial to construct a clear syllabus and prioritize structure and punctuality.

### GROUP WORK

Students are sometimes required to give presentations and work in groups with their peers. However, group work can often create added pressure on students who are socially isolated or struggle with anxiety.

### NEEDS AWARENESS

Creating a classroom environment where students feel comfortable discussing challenges, strengths and academic needs may encourage students to discuss the accommodations they receive through the Office of Disability Services (ODS), and together you can strategize how they can be implemented in the classroom setting.



# CLASS PARTICIPATION

## Challenge

Students may not be aware that they can discuss their individual needs with you, and that you'll be open to exploring those needs. When faculty normalize seeking help and using campus resources, students often feel more comfortable asking for support. Some students may be in the process of receiving diagnoses, or navigating the accommodations process, but may feel empowered to speak to you sooner when encouraged to do so. Some students may already have accommodations but are reluctant to discuss them, fearing confrontation. Clarifying how you approach students' needs for official accommodations can help a student understand what to expect.

## Best Practices

A class syllabus that indicates class participation accounts for 5 percent of the total grade, for example, can intimidate students with anxiety and those who are afraid of speaking in a large class. Clarify what types of participation count toward the grade and how much participation is expected. If possible, consider having the following multiple methods of participation count toward grades and provide this list of options on the syllabus:

- Asking questions and participating in discussion during class
- Staying after class to ask questions
- Asking questions through email
- Asking or answering questions in the online class discussion forum
- Participating in office hours

Clarify on the syllabus, for example, that each instance of participation is worth 1 point, and students are expected to have 2 points per week for full participation marks.





## SENSORY & PHYSICAL LOCATION

### Challenge

Neurodivergent students may have differences in brain structure that cause a sensitivity to sensory inputs such as light and sound. Or they may need to move or fidget (also called “stimming”) in class to meet their physical and psychological needs. While this may be perceived as the student not paying attention, it usually helps students stay calm and focus clearly on material.

### Best Practices

If you have plans to show an educational video, consider the sounds and visuals that will be shared. Loud or quick changes in sounds can overwhelm all students. Consider the following inclusive practices:

- Provide a warning if class materials involve a sudden or loud sound or sudden bright/ flashing lights.
- Be aware of in-class demonstrations and videos that feature sudden or unexpected changes in sensory inputs.

Also, be open to a student’s need for movement:

- Don’t assume fidgeting is due to lack of interest in the class.
- It is important that the student knows they can leave the classroom if they are overwhelmed and need space, so simply mentioning at the beginning of the term that students are invited to step out as needed can be helpful.
- If the current chair arrangement doesn’t allow students to easily step out, consider adding a couple of chairs right by the door.

### IMPORTANT NOTE

Lights and sounds can be triggering for other students in the classroom. A warning or notification can be helpful.

# TIMING & STRUCTURE

## Challenge

Incomplete syllabi, pop quizzes, holding students after class ends and partner work can make a course very stressful for neurodivergent students. While most students don't seem to mind these challenges, a neurodivergent student often relies on predictability to navigate the day.

## Best Practices

Punctuality, schedules and routines can be key aspects of stability for all students, and especially for neurodivergent students.

Having a clearly written syllabus from the start of the course can help students understand course expectations, prepare for class and determine if the class is a good fit for them. Consider offering a comprehensive, easy-to-read syllabus that addresses the following:

- Office hours schedule
- Necessary textbooks and additional resources (computer programs, secondary textbooks, etc.)
- Homework policy and frequency
- What subjects will be covered on what dates — utilize the D2L calendar
- Where written instructions for homework and projects can be found
- Any expectations for in-class participation or group work
- How the final grade will be assigned
- How reading will be weighted
- Unambiguous phrasing

Other practices that can help:

- Invite students to ask questions about deadlines and assignments.
- Post lecture slides/notes online prior to a lecture. Respect a student's need for extra processing time.
- Provide students with the option of giving a prerecorded (versus "live") class presentation to help students who have speaking anxiety or students who have fluctuating levels of verbal communication ability.
- Set an alarm for 2 minutes before class ends and use that reminder to wrap up all important material and announcements so that class can end on time.
- Allow students to leave immediately at the end of class and not be expected to stay overtime.
- Tell students that leaving on time is permissible and any content covered after class ends will be reviewed at the beginning of the next class.



# GROUP WORK

## Challenge

Group work can be stressful for neurodivergent students. In fact, some students will not take a course based on the amount of group work required. If possible, let students know ahead of time if there is an expectation for impromptu group work and on-the-spot classroom participation. Many students do well when they know what is expected of them socially. Asking students to form groups can be quite stressful. Students might wonder:

- What if no one wants me in their group? (This can be particularly stressful for neurodivergent students who have often experienced some amount of social isolation in their life.)
- How do I ask others to join their group? (For students with social anxiety, being expected to form groups on the spot can be stressful.)

## Best Practices

- Eliminate uncertainty about the class structure.
- Give students time to prepare for social interaction.
- If you like to do occasional group work, let students know one class in advance.
- Assign groups ahead of time, thereby removing anxiety associated with the process.







# DEMONSTRATE AN AWARENESS OF STUDENT NEEDS

## Challenge

All college students are learning how to effectively self-advocate. Faculty can foster an environment that invites discussion regarding student needs. Neurodivergent students may have accommodations established through ODS. It is helpful for professors to reach out to these students at the beginning of the semester and offer to clarify course expectations as needed. When faculty normalize seeking help and using campus resources, students often feel more comfortable asking for support. Some students may be in the process of receiving diagnoses or navigating the accommodations process but may feel empowered to discuss their needs and challenges when encouraged to do so.

## Best practices

- Give a statement about ODS accommodations and support.
- Add to your syllabus that students are welcome to discuss ODS accommodation needs with you.
- Help students feel more comfortable discussing their accommodations.
- If you are unclear about accommodations outlined in letters from ODS, reach out to the office and ask for support.
- Speak directly with the student to help understand what might be causing problems with academic performance and provide relevant resources to the student, including:
  - ODS
  - Student Educational Services
  - Tutoring
  - On Your Marq