**MOVING TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR STUDENTS: OUR EXPERIENCES WITH NEURODIVERSITY**

**Part I: Introduction**

This roundtable is first, and foremost, intended to provide a safe space for attendees to share their experiences, questions, concerns, and perspectives in regard to student neurodiversity in higher education. Desired outcomes for the roundtable include increasing awareness of neurodiversity and conveying the importance of considering neurodiverse students in the broader dialogue addressing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within higher education.

Any discussion of neurodiversity must include how it is being defined. Geyer (2021) defines neurodivergent individuals as people with atypical neurological development. Clouder et al (2020) notes that the term neurodiversity focuses on "differences" in individual brain function and behavioral traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the population. The concept of neurodiversity in higher education continues to evolve and there is not a universal definition. Many universities consider the scope of neurodiversity to include ADD/ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disabilities, and other learning differences (Griffin & Pollak, 2009). Despite the lack of a universal definition of neurodiversity, research suggests that the number of neurodivergent students is increasing in higher education (Couzens et al., 2015). However, neurodivergent students have not seen the same success as their neurotypical peers. Farmer's et al (2014) research showed that 37% of students with ADHD and/or learning disabilities completed their degrees while 51.2% of their neurotypical peers completed their degree. As

educators in higher education, we should aspire to see all students perform to their academic potential.  As the number of neurodivergent students who pursue higher education continues to increase, the above statistics beg the question of how can university faculty and staff help neurodivergent students address the challenges they face and provide supports to improve academic success equivalent to their neurotypical peers? I believe the answer to that question begins with honest dialogue about our experiences with neurodiversity.

**Part II:  Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

The theoretical foundation for this roundtable is the theory of inclusive learning and teaching (Lawrie, Marquis, Fuller, Newman, Qui, Nomikoudis, & Roelofs, van Dam, 2017). Fundamentally, inclusive learning and teaching recognizes that all students are entitled to a learning experience that respects diversity, enables participation, removes barriers and anticipates and considers a variety of learning needs and preferences.  Inclusive learning and teaching is clearly intertwined with the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) movement.  Shmulsky et al. (2021) asserts that as postsecondary institutions continue to advance DEI and inclusive learning and teaching, neurodiversity is a facet that must be considered in these efforts.

In terms of teaching implications, the reality that most faculty in higher education have had little or no formal training in neurodiversity (Yahoo news, 2021) presents a significant challenge to inclusive learning and teaching.  With such limited awareness of neurodiversity, many instructors teaching a class that includes neurodiverse students may experience feelings of anxiety and inadequacy, as well as frustration and even resentment (Geyer, 2021).   While survey research reported in Yahoo news (2021) indicates that 91% of educators agree that access to neurodiversity inclusion training will help teachers create a more inclusive learning environment

for students, the availability and quality of the training varies widely across college campuses (OECD, 2014). University supports for students with disclosed neurodiversity also vary widely (Armstrong, 2012).  While some student support programs offer a wide variety of supports, including personalized counseling, uniquely designed assignments, tutoring, etc., others provide little more than authorizing additional time to complete a timed exam (Clouder et al., 2020). Further complicating the issue is that access to university supports require (in most cases) that a student "disclose" their neurodiversity via a submission to the appropriate office within the university and formally request "accommodations."  The fear of stigmatization and labelling serves as a barrier for the neurodivergent student to make such a request (Clouder, et al., 2020). In their recommendations, Clouder at al. (2020) emphasize that rather than having a student reach a breaking point before requesting university supports, it is crucial to find ways of encouraging students to disclose any special needs, assess learning needs and put in place relevant support mechanisms.  Creating this type of trusting and inclusive environment that affirms difference is a multi-faceted undertaking by multiple stakeholders at the college or university.  While the faculty member clearly plays a role, there is still much that is unclear concerning the best way to enact that role.  This roundtable discussion provides a safe place to begin exploring the possibilities.

**Part III: Session Description**

Following brief introductions (10 mins.), the roundtable session will invite attendees to briefly share their experience with neurodiversity in undergraduate and/or graduate classrooms (depending on size of group, up to 20 mins.).  In particular, attendees will be encouraged to share

personal emotions associated with their experiences (e.g., anxiety, insecurity, resentment, responsibility, appreciation, etc.).

The second half of the discussion time will focus on sharing of approaches that appear to have worked well in creating an inclusive environment where all students can be successful. These approaches might include effective partnering with department heads/colleagues about neurodiversity and open dialogue about how best to build inclusive classroom environments, effective partnering with university offices (e.g., student support services, tutoring, mental health counseling services, resident life/housing, etc.) which might have involved particular student accommodations, neurodiversity training, etc. Other approaches for sharing might include dialogue/collaboration with university diversity-equity-inclusion (DEI) committees, as well as university teaching & learning divisions regarding Universal Design (UD) principles for designing courses (CAST, 2018). Further, sharing of individual class approaches, such as syllabus content related to affirming neurodiversity, including discussions of management theorists/practitioners which include neurodiverse individuals, and instructor emphasis on the value of neurodiversity into both individual student and classroom conversations.

Ideally, attendees will leave the session having felt "heard" and with new ideas and perspectives.

**References**

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Yahoo news (2021):  *91% Of Educators Agree That Access to Neurodiversity Inclusion Training Will Help Teachers Create a More Inclusive Learning Environment for Students.* https://www.yahoo.com/now/91-educators-agree-access-neurodiversity-120000035.html