





NEURODIVERSITY: BROADENING OUR LENS

EXPANDING UNDERSTANDING OF COGNITIVE AND COMMUNICATION
DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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How familiar are you with the term *Neurodiversity*?

1

Neuro-What?

2

I've heard the term....

3

I can write or speak the meaning

4

I can give examples and discuss

5

I am well versed and can teach others

**Hands up if you identify as
Neurodivergent**

**Hands up if you're not ready to
share**



Introduction to Me

- Pracademic
 - Launched in Student Affairs
 - Faculty and Private Practice - 31 Years
 - Focus on Transitions from HS to College & College to Career
 - Focus on Health and wellbeing
- Mediocre College Student
- Law School Drop out
- Parent
- Awards
 - Most enthusiastic Camper (1977)
 - Most Energetic Camper (1978)
 - Most spirited Camper (1979)
 - Brighter than the Sun Award (1980)
 - Landmark College impact award (2014)
 - SGA Faculty Recognition Award (2024)



Neurodivergent – not if, but how?

What does your teaching assume?

Think of a student who seemed disengaged, disorganized, late, quiet, or resistant.

What did you assume was happening?

What else might explain the same behavior?

Pair-share or private reflection • 90 seconds • sharing is optional

Introducing our lens for the next hour

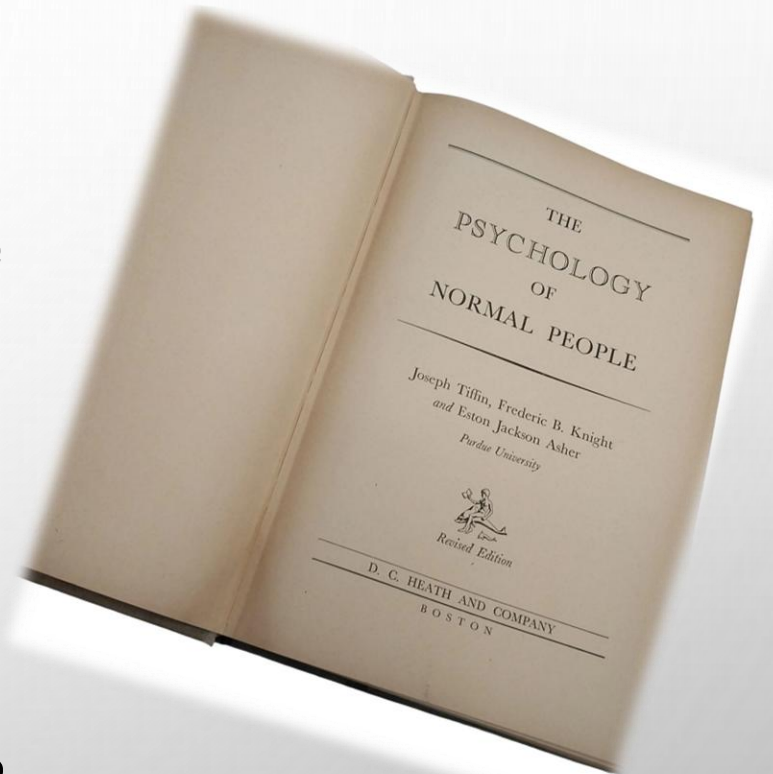
- Name neurodiversity and the language we use.
- Notice how time boundaries, communication, and environments shape access.
- Reframe accommodation work as a signal about course design.
- Leave with one realistic change to test.



Consider this....

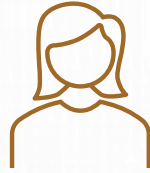
No two people are exactly alike on any trait yet studied. Indeed, the universal existence of individual variation is one of the thoroughly demonstrated principles of modern psychology.

The Psychology of Normal People
Tiffen et al.
1946





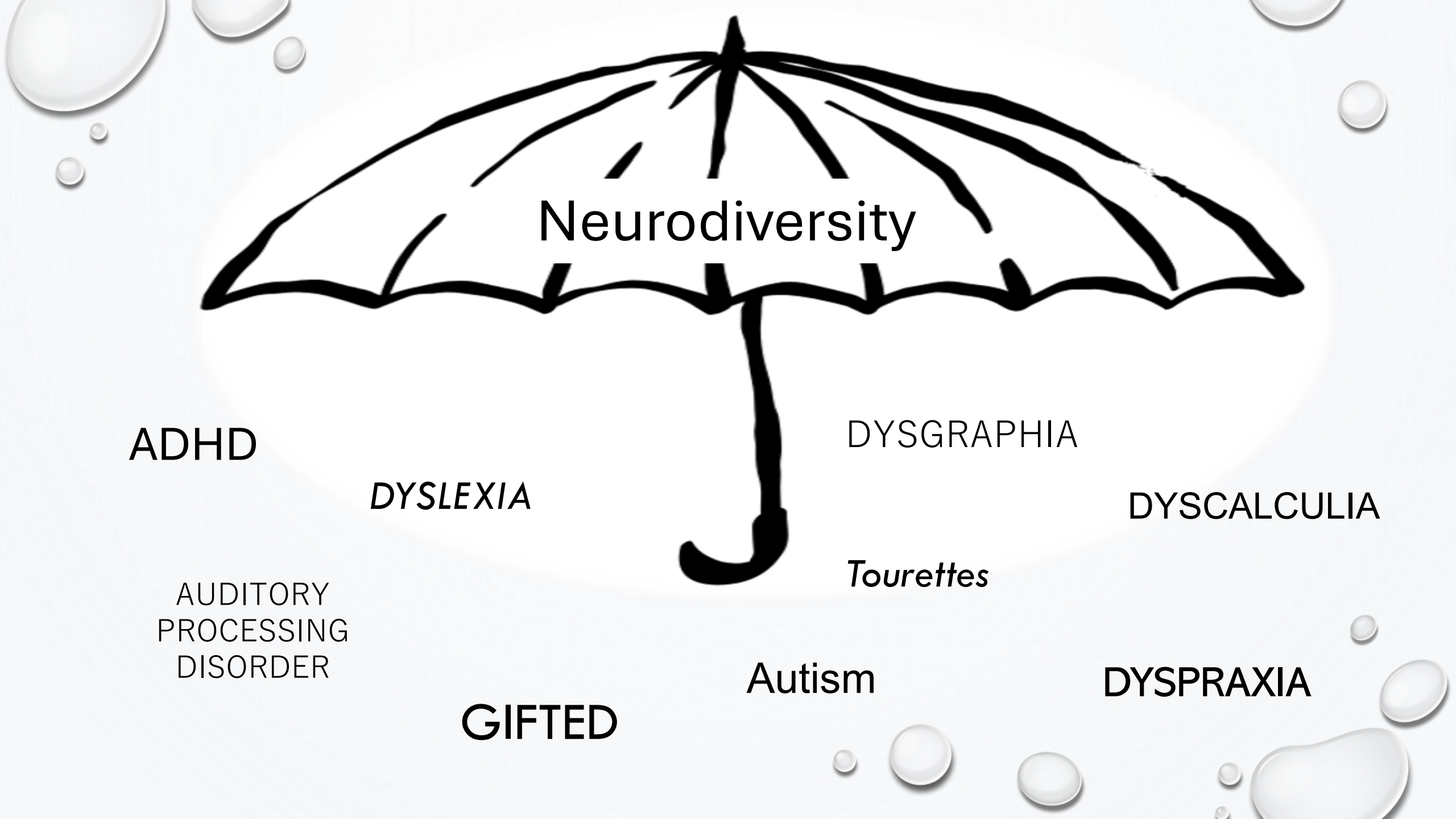




A few terms worth distinguishing

- **Neurodiversity:** the natural variation among human minds and nervous systems.
- **Neurodivergent:** a person whose neurocognitive functioning diverges from dominant norms.
- **Neurotypical:** a person whose neurocognitive functioning aligns with dominant norms in a given context.
- **Neurodiverse:** a group that includes multiple kinds of minds—not a synonym for neurodivergent.

Language is a tool for precision and respect; preferences vary by person and community.



Neurodiversity

ADHD

DYSLEXIA

DYSGRAPHIA

DYSCALCULIA

AUDITORY
PROCESSING
DISORDER

Tourettes

Autism

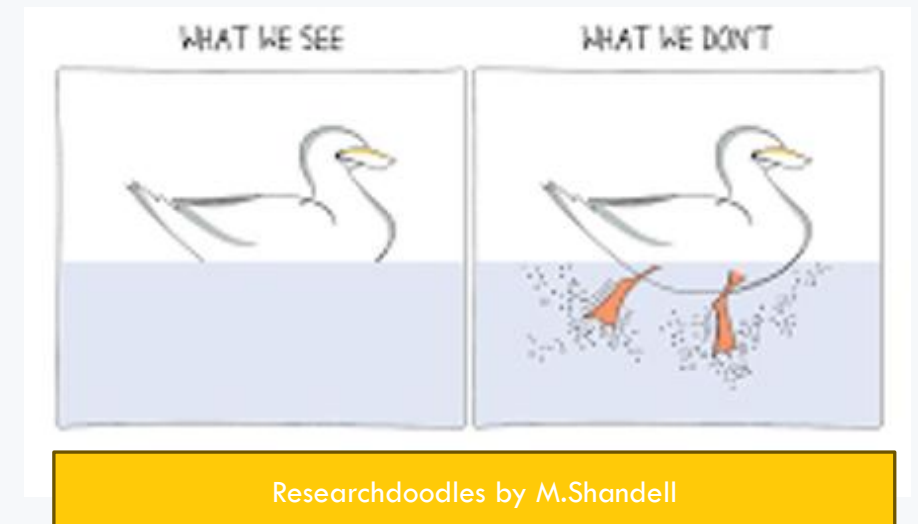
DYSPRAXIA

GIFTED

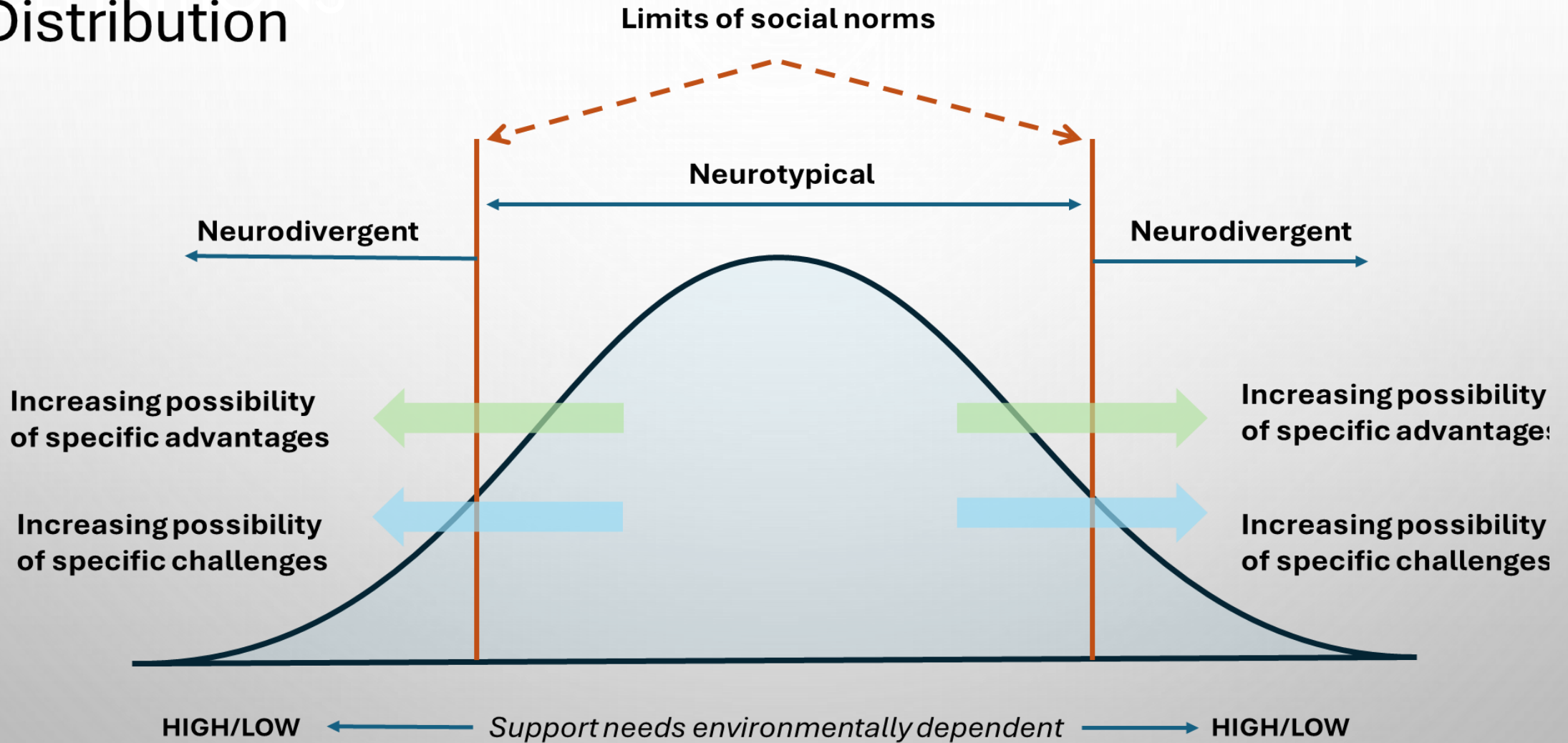
Prevalence of Reported Disabilities

**21% of US undergraduates reporting disabilities in 2019-2020.
(that's 1 in 5) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2023)**

- 15% ADHD
- 5% Learning disability
- 3% Autism
- 1% Speech and Language
- 36% Anxiety
- 28% Depression



Neurodiversity Distribution



From “fix the person” to “question the fit”

PATHOLOGY LENS

Where is the deficit?

How do we normalize
performance?

Alter the person

NEURODIVERSITY LENS

What is the person–environment
fit?

What barriers are built into the
setting?

Alter the environment

This is not denying disability, distress, or support needs. It is widening the explanation—and the response.



Difference is not a single profile

- Neurotypes can include autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and others.
- People within *any label* vary widely in sensory processing, attention, language, emotional regulation, memory, physical energy, social energy and executive functioning.
- Strengths and support needs can coexist—and shift across settings, tasks, and time.

Ask: “What helps you do your best work?” rather than assuming you know from a label.

Access friction often lives in the interaction

PERSON

attention • sensory
needs
processing • energy

TASK

ambiguity • memory
load
time pressure • format

ENVIRONMENT

noise • norms •
policies
technology •
assumptions

Access friction = the extra effort required to navigate a design that was not built with you in mind.

Crip time: whose clock is the course built around?

- Alison Kafer and Ellen Samuels invite us to question supposedly neutral expectations about time.
- Deadlines, attendance rules, response speed, and “reasonable pace” encode assumptions about bodies and minds.
- Flexibility is not the absence of standards; it is asking which timing requirements are essential to the learning goal.

Prompt: Which course deadline or time rule is pedagogically essential—and which is simply familiar? (Take 90 seconds....)

Double empathy: misunderstanding goes both ways

- Damian Milton's theory challenges the idea that communication difficulty belongs only to the autistic person.
- People with different experiences, expectations, and communication styles can misread one another.
- Curiosity replaces mind-reading: clarify expectations, check interpretations, and make implicit rules explicit.

Strengths-based does not mean challenge-free

- Start with interests, capabilities, strategies, and conditions that support contribution.
- Notice uneven or “spiky” profiles: a student may excel at complex analysis and struggle with task initiation.
- Do not romanticize neurodivergence or require every difference to become a superpower.
- Design for agency: ask students what works, what costs them effort, and what support would help.

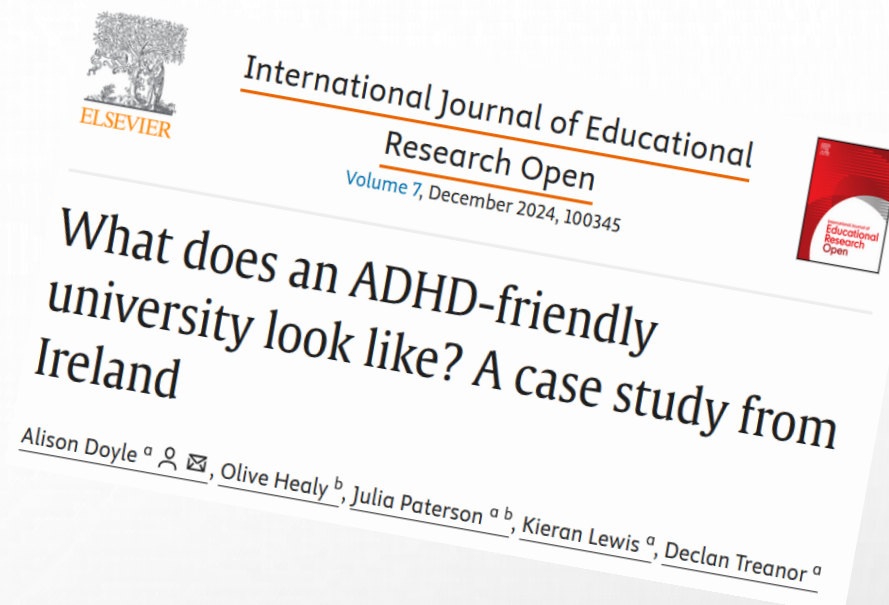
“I’m bending over backwards for students.”

**That effort is real.
The time, judgment, and
emotional labor are real.**

**And repeated individual exceptions
can be data:
Where is the course creating
avoidable friction?**

**The goal is not “do more for everyone.” It is “design better where we
can—and keep human flexibility where we must.”**

On-line Survey of 18,900 Irish students
 In depth interviews 34 students
 Qualitative data from open-ended text response



Navigating college with ADHD	What Does and ADHD Friendly College look like	Advice for Prospective students	My ADHD
Awareness and Understanding Disclosure Social Interactions Academic skills and activities Achievement and attainment Deadlines and stress Orientation and information Reasonable Accommodations	Universal Design for Learning Medical and therapeutic supports Physical environment Staff Awareness and Understanding Removing systemic barriers Signposting ADHD supports	Coping mechanisms Human supports Managing academic tasks Medication Peers Practical strategies Self-Advocacy	Executive Function Cognitive and behavior factors Coping mechanisms Medication Mental Health Physical and sensory preferences Sensory triggers

UDL: inclusive design, not an endless list of fixes

01

ENGAGEMENT

More than one way to connect, persist, and find relevance.

02

REPRESENTATION

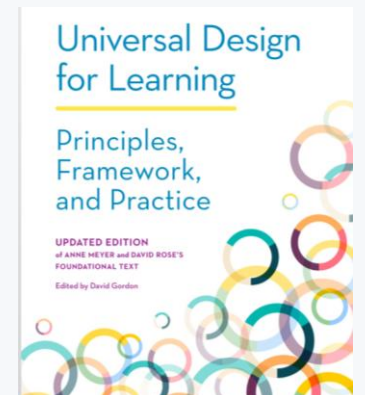
More than one way to access information and meaning.

03

ACTION & EXPRESSION

More than one way to practice and demonstrate learning.

UDL does not remove the need for accommodations; it can reduce preventable barriers and repeated rework.



Start with one pinch point: the Plus-One approach

- Thomas Tobin and Kirsten Behling recommend starting where students already get stuck.
- Where do questions repeat? Where do students misread directions or struggle to show what they know?
- Add one more way to access, engage with, or demonstrate the learning—without redesigning the entire course.

Examples: a worked example, a visual assignment map, captions/transcript, or one additional response format.

A 3-minute design audit

Choose one course moment that creates friction.

1

PINPOINT

Where do students get stuck, confused, or need exceptions?

2

RECONSIDER

What assumption does this design make about time, attention, communication, or memory?

3

PLUS ONE

What small change could make the path clearer or more flexible?

Takeaway: write one change you can test in the next two weeks.

Low-lift design moves with broad reach



- Make directions visible: steps, examples, criteria, and what “done” looks like.
- Chunk long assignments into milestones with feedback before the final deadline.
- Share slides, notes, captions, transcripts, or readings in accessible formats ahead of time.
- Offer structured choices in how students practice or demonstrate the same learning outcome.
- Explain the purpose behind policies; distinguish essential requirements from inherited habits.
- Get ahead of it. Invite students to talk about their needs. Share your own hacks

UDL is more than an individual teaching strategy



If inclusive design depends only on individual goodwill, it will remain uneven and unsustainable.

Leave with a *Plus One*

Complete this sentence:

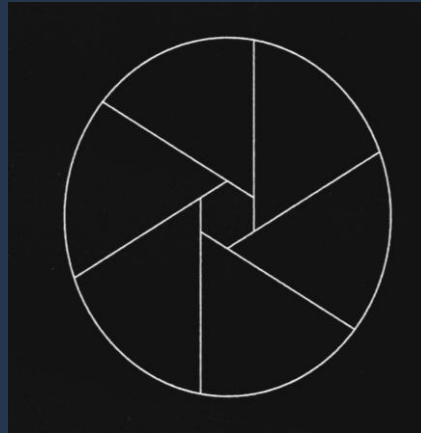
“One point of friction I will address is _____. I will try _____ by _____.”

Optional: tell a partner what evidence would help you know whether it worked.

Curiosity over certainty • access over assumptions • sustainable change over heroic effort

Broaden the lens.

Notice the mind behind the behavior.
Notice the barrier inside the design.
Notice the change within reach.



Thank you!!

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Flexible schedule for busy professionals



Targets concrete classroom practices



Mix of live & asynchronous discussion

www.landmark.edu/certificates



Selected sources & further reading

- Walker, N. (2014/2021). Neurodiversity: Some basic terms & definitions; Neuroqueer Heresies.
- Milton, D. E. M. (2012). On the ontological status of autism: The ‘double empathy problem’. *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883–887.
- Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press.
- Samuels, E. (2017). Six ways of looking at crip time. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 37(3).
- Tobin, T. J., & Behling, K. T. (2018). *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education*. WVU Press.
- CAST. (2024). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines*, version 3.0.

Wait Until Dark

By Dr. Shrirang Saharabudhe
(selected stanzas)

Don't give sympathy; nor adopt apathy
To be inclusive;
We need to show empathy

Disability is relative; an interesting label
Wait until dark; the sighted are disabled

Accessibility for some; comfort for many
It's not so much extra cost; gimme a break honey

Accessibility isn't an icing; it's part of the cake
Include it from the beginning;
Well before you bake