

Neurodiversity Guidebook

Summer 2025



Overview

This guidebook provides some basic information on neurodiversity and how the Sonoma State community can make our campus more accessible. It focuses on three key takeaways:

1. Neurodiversity is a Natural Part of Our Community
2. Your Communication and Design Choices Impact Accessibility
3. Resources at Sonoma State - and Beyond - Can Support You

Please note that this guidebook serves as an introduction to neurodiversity. Please see Section 3 for resources you can reach out to for additional information, training, and education.

Section 1: Neurodiversity is a Natural Part of Our Community

Basic Definitions

First, we want to define four terms: neurotype, neurodiversity, neurodivergent, and neurotypical:

- **Neurotype** refers to the specific way(s) in which someone's brain works
 - Neurotypes may be reflected in how someone *communicates, expresses themselves, learns things, and/or processes information*
- **Neurodiversity** refers to the natural diversity of neurotypes among people
- **Neurodivergent** refers to a person – or group of people – with a minority neurotype
- **Neurotypical** refers to a person – or group of people – with a majority neurotype

Much like a single person cannot be “diverse,” a single person cannot be “neurodiverse.” Groups of people, however, can be neurodiverse. “Neurodivergent” refers to anyone whose neurotype (brain chemistry, brain structure, way of thinking) is outside of the “norm.” On the other hand, if your neurotype is similar to the majority of people, then you would be “neurotypical.” A person can identify as neurodivergent or neurotypical.

“Neurodivergent” is a broad term that encompasses all neurotypes that deviate from the norm.

Neurodivergent Neurotypes & Identities

“Neurodiversity” and related terms come from the Autistic Rights Movement in the 1990s, stemming from the broader Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In the time since, the definition of “neurodivergent” has expanded to include neurotypes such as:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Learning disabilities, such as:
 - Dyslexia
 - Dysgraphia
 - Dyspraxia
 - Dyscalculia

While these are some standard examples of what neurodiversity can look like, it is a broad term. Neurodivergent identities can include mental health conditions (e.g., schizophrenia, anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder), traumatic brain injuries, and anything else that affects your brain structure and function. The entire neurodiverse community does not accept this expanded definition of the term. Mental health conditions can often be treated with medical interventions to improve quality of life. However, many traits of autism and other neurodevelopmental differences, which many feel are an important part of their identity.

Neurodivergence in the Sonoma State Community

It is estimated that 15-20% of the world’s population exhibits some form of neurodivergence. If we apply this estimate to the statistics reported by SSU for the 2023-2024 period, there may be approximately one thousand neurodivergent individuals in the SSU community. Masking is a behavior where a neurodivergent individual attempts to hide their differences. The prevalence of masking might give the false impression that there are fewer neurodivergent individuals than there actually are. Masking also has adverse mental health effects on neurodivergent people and can cause us to underestimate the diversity of neurotypes in our community.

In other words, SSU is already a neurodiverse community. However, there is still work each member of the SSU community can do to fulfill SSU’s [mission](#). This mission is the promise that SSU “is committed to educational access and excellence.”

How Society Can Be Disabling for Neurodivergent Individuals

Neurotypical people built our world and it often fails to accommodate neurodivergent individuals. This causes unnecessary distress in many parts of everyday life - such as at school, work, shopping, and in social spaces. While it may not always be feasible to rework your world to accommodate all the needs of neurodivergent people, there are things you can do.

Neurodiversity manifests differently in each individual, particularly for women and people of color. Women and non-white people are often underdiagnosed as neurodivergent due to a lack of awareness of these differences. There are many other intersectional identities represented among neurodivergent community members, including but not limited to LGBTQ identities such as non-binary, transgender, or genderqueer.

However, there are some common difficulties for neurodivergent members of our community:

- Difficulty following complex directions
- Overstimulation due to too many sounds, "busy" visual field, unpleasant textures, crowded classrooms or walkways, etc.
- Overstimulation due to the brightness of classroom screens
- Understimulation due to a lack of pleasant stimuli (lack of windows, lack of fidget toys or other sensory coping tools, inability to take sensory breaks)
- Emotional exhaustion due to constant masking
- Difficulty staying focused, initiating tasks, or completing tasks on time
- Difficulty reading
- Difficulty with fine motor movements
- And many more!

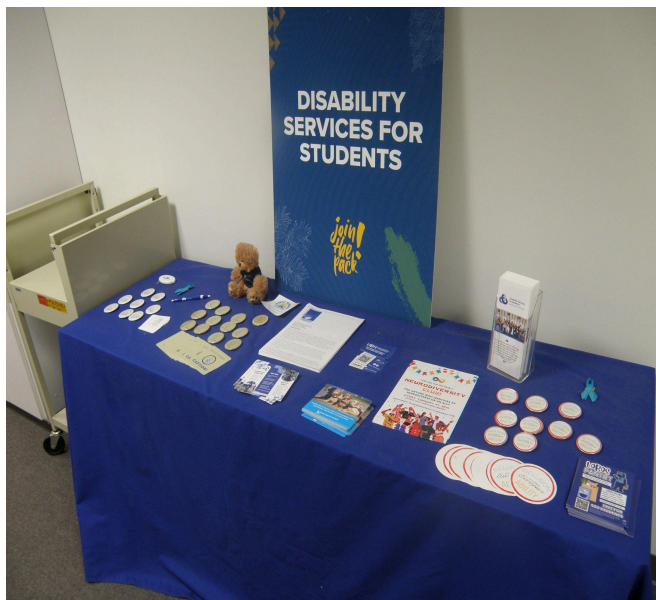


Table of resources and pamphlets inside of room 1014A in Schulz

Oftentimes, a student may seem lazy or unfocused. However, they may be struggling with an aspect of a given assignment. These students may need support or accommodations to achieve the same level of success as their neurotypical classmates. It is helpful for professors, supervisors, and colleagues to discuss individual needs and be flexible about rules and requirements.

Some neurodivergent people are non-speaking and use AAC (alternative and augmentative communication) methods instead. These can include devices with type-to-speech technology, whiteboards, sign language, and a variety of other communication methods.

How Society Can Enable Neurodivergent Individuals to Succeed

While having a nervous system that works differently can come with unique challenges, it can also bring unique strengths. As such, an accommodating environment can help highlight a neurodivergent person's strengths and alleviate their challenges.

Just as with the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals, these strengths vary widely among people. Neurodivergent individuals often bring a variety of valuable strengths. They may:



Door of Disability Services for Students, room 1014A in Schulz Information Center

- Focus intensely on areas of interest
- Maintain keen attention to detail
- Excel at written communication
- Recognize complex patterns
- Organize information, objects, or systems effectively
- Make unconventional connections that lead to creative insights, innovative problem-solving, and artistic novelty
- Communicate directly and straightforwardly
- Demonstrate strong empathy and a keen sense of justice
- Work independently with sustained motivation
- And many more!

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

This guidebook asks our community to implement the ideals of the neurodiversity paradigm into our work and interactions with the following assumptions:

1. It is natural and valuable for people to have different neurotypes
2. One neurotype is not inherently better than another
3. Neurodiversity, like all forms of diversity, is a source of creativity and possibility

Section 2: Your Communication and Design Choices Impact Access

Talking about Neurodivergence

Respecting Neurodivergent Identity

Neurodivergent and disabled individuals often use different terms to describe themselves. In this document, we use two of these kinds of terms:

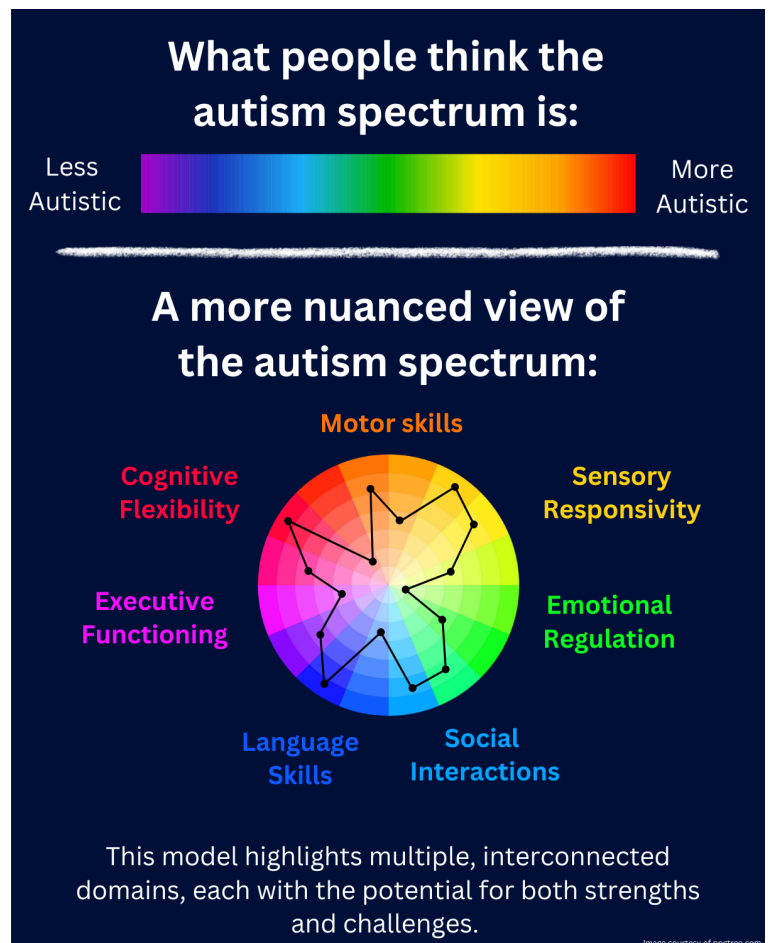
- Identity-first language (e.g., autistic person, wheelchair user)
- Person-first language (e.g., person with autism, person with mobility impairment)

In recent years, identity-first language has become increasingly popular and preferred by neurodivergent communities; however, we encourage folks to use the terms they prefer to describe themselves.

In other words, if you don't know someone's preferences, ask!

Labels related to an individual's functioning (i.e., high-functioning or low-functioning) are widely considered stigmatizing and outdated. Neurotypical people often used these terms to refer to someone's ability to complete classwork or their expressive language. However, they do not help us understand where neurodivergent people actually do or don't need support.

A helpful way to visualize people's strengths and weaknesses is to use a color wheel. This wheel shows where someone may feel more or less comfortable in different areas of daily living. Many of these areas are not outwardly apparent but affect the individual on a deep level. There is overlap between each of these domains, and an individual can have both strengths and challenges in each area. For example, someone may have trouble with spoken language but might excel at writing. This could make in-person social interactions more difficult, but it may also make online relationships easier.



Integrating Neurodivergent Perspectives

There are multiple ways to represent neurodivergent viewpoints in campus settings, such as:

- Talk about neurodivergent professionals in the field
- Bring in neurodivergent speakers through professional organizations
- Use the terms “neurodivergent” and “neurodiversity” properly

Additionally, if you are neurodivergent and are comfortable doing so, consider sharing your own experiences. Neurodivergent faculty and staff speaking openly can make a huge impact on neurodivergent students and help dispel stigma. Neurotypical faculty and staff can do their best to offer platforms for neurodivergent students.



Waiting room for Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

Universal Design for Learning: How to Support Everyone in the Classroom

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a 3-principle framework meant to increase access for all students in educational environments, such as colleges, universities, and schools. In contrast to individual accommodations, UDL practices are meant to be implemented *proactively* without the need for a student to request them.

UDL Principle 1: Engagement

Engagement involves setting clear expectations and providing feedback. This helps neurodivergent students because many struggle with unclear directions, participating in discussions, or asking clarifying questions. This principle is all about making students' learning experiences meaningful. For example:

- An advisor emails a student after a meeting with a brief summary and clear next steps
- A club leader surveys members about their hopes for the club, concerns, and needs
- A teacher invites a student to office hours to go over a recent assignment together
- A professor sets classroom guidelines and gives students a chance to ask questions
- A resident assistant sets up a community calendar with important dates and reminders

UDL Principle 2: Representation

Representation involves making information accessible and understandable. Neurodivergent people often have preferences for how they receive their information (i.e., text-based, video-based, or demonstration-based). It is best to provide information in as many formats as possible to help the most people. For example:

- An advisor turns on captions and live transcript during Zoom meetings
- A presenter describes important visual information from images and videos
- A student uses built-in accessibility checkers while designing a LoboVision flier
- An event planner posts instructions on requesting accommodations in multiple formats with multiple clearly listed means of contact (e.g., email, phone, etc.)
- Allowing the use of technology such as translation tools and speech-to-text software
- Providing explicit guidelines for each step of more complex processes

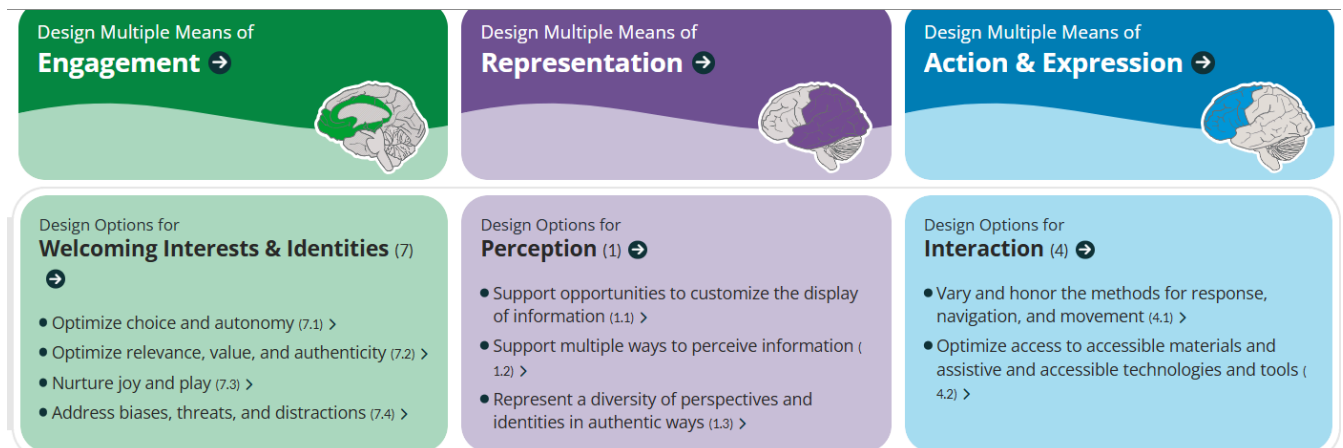
UDL Principle 3: Action & Expression

Action & Expression involves providing multiple ways to show knowledge & skill. One particular method, like presenting in front of the class, may be overwhelming for one neurodiverse person but not for another. However, there are other ways to evaluate skill or ability. For example:

- A hiring committee evaluates job candidates using interviews and sample projects
- A teacher splits a large, single-grade project into a variety of smaller, graded tasks
- A private instructor sets up opportunities for students to do self-evaluations
- An advisor suggests tools that support students' writing, note-taking, and/or planning
- An audition panel uses a multi-stage process to assess students on relevant skills

Embracing a UDL Mindset

While UDL is intended to maximize access for the greatest variety of students, it's impossible to anticipate any potential challenges. However, by integrating parts of UDL into practice, we can gradually increase accessibility and make it easier to adapt to unexpected or unique situations. For more information on UDL, visit the [CAST website at udlguidelines.cast.org](https://udlguidelines.cast.org).



A graph of UDL meanings and practices

Section 3: Existing Resources at Sonoma State - and Beyond - Can Support You

Making SSU more welcoming to neurodivergent individuals is an ongoing process that will require collaboration across campus – and beyond. We've highlighted a few of these resources, along with suggestions on how they can provide support.

SSU Resources

Seawolf Services

Located in Salazar Hall, Seawolf Services offers assistance with financial aid, ID cards, and answers to general questions about life at SSU.

seawolf.servicecenter@sonoma.edu

(707)-664-2308

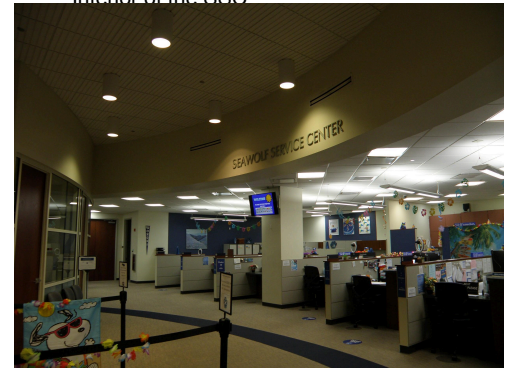
Outside of Salazar, home of the SSC



Seawolf Service Center (SSC)



Interior of the SSC



Disability Services for Students (DSS)

SSU strives to provide equitable access and full participation in its programs and activities.

[Disability Services for Students](#) (DSS) is the office responsible for facilitating individualized accommodations for students with disabilities and supporting SSU's commitment to creating and maintaining an accessible and inclusive environment. Reach out by email at disability.services@sonoma.edu to:

- Refer a student who discloses a disability
- Learn about Neurodiversity initiatives at SSU
- Request a training session on accessibility, disability, and/or neurodiversity

Neurodiversity Club

The purpose of the Neurodiversity Club is to create a space and support network for neurodiverse students at SSU. Our goal is to host fun events about Neurodiversity and for

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Neurodiverse people, including low-stimulation hangouts, movie nights with headphones, and Autism Celebration Month events. To learn more or get involved, contact:

neurodiversityclubssu@gmail.com

To join our online community on Discord:

<https://discord.gg/RpJ4zmYpSr>

Learning and Academic Resource Center

LARC provides free, peer academic support through three programs: the Writing Center, the Tutorial Program, and the Supplemental Instruction Program. Tutors are equipped to handle a variety of support needs.



Learning and Academic Resource Center interior,
on the first floor of the library



Outside of the LARC

Human Resources

Our ADA Specialist assists in evaluating accommodation requests, ensuring that all necessary documentation is received, and facilitates conversations between the employee and the appropriate administrator to determine what, if any, reasonable accommodations to make.

Accommodations can include:

- Modified equipment
- Assistive technology
- Workstation modification
- Job restructuring
- Modified work schedule
- Leave of absence

To learn more about SSU's Workers' Compensation, ADA, and Leave Specialist contact:

HRAccommodations@sonoma.edu.

Health and Wellness

Health and Wellness embraces an integrated, holistic approach to fostering the health and well-being of every student. Health and Wellness encompasses five functional areas that offer distinct services, resources, and programs. For more information, please visit the Health and Wellness website. Some services include:

- [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#), which provides many mental health services, including goal-focused counseling, group counseling, and community mental health education
- Support and Skills groups for various groups. These groups include but are not limited to an ADHD skill group and an autism support group
- Case management services, including helping students access appropriate treatment, campus resources, and community resources



A CAPS office



CAPS waiting room



One of the support group rooms

Resources Outside of SSU

[Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities \(RAMPD\)](#)

RAMPD aims to connect musicians with disabilities across the music, entertainment, and event industries. Their member database highlights folks with a variety of disabilities across these industries working in various professions and musical genres.

[CAST](#)

CAST is dedicated to helping educators apply the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in their classrooms and other educational settings. They provide a graphic organizer, as well as a thorough breakdown of the principles of UDL, to help instructors use them effectively.

[Accessible Syllabus](#)

This website is a resource to help course instructors develop syllabi that are accessible and approachable. It provides suggestions across four main areas: image, text, rhetoric, and policy, with examples of how to implement each.

[Sins Invalid/Disability Justice](#)

Founded as a performance collective, Sins Invalid has since become a central group for the Disability Justice movement. This movement utilizes 10 main principles that individuals can implement into their work and practice.

[College Autism Network](#)

The College Autism Network connects diverse stakeholders involved in evidence-based efforts to enhance access, experiences, and outcomes for postsecondary students with autism. Each year, they host the College Autism Summit, a professional conference. The Summit has been a gathering place for people who support autistic college students, and for self-advocates themselves, to share challenges, resources, and ideas.

Terminology

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) - A developmental difference or disability that impacts executive functions like attention, impulse control, and planning.

Autism - A neurodevelopmental difference or disability that impacts how a person approaches social communication, social interactions, and routines. Autistic people experience a range of strengths and needs in areas such as sensory processing, communication, and executive function.

Camouflage/Masking - Behaviors and techniques used to appear “more neurotypical”, such as imitating body language or speech patterns, or hiding one’s genuine reactions and needs, such as forcing eye contact and avoiding stimming behaviors.

Dysgraphia - A learning disability that affects motor skills related to written expression, like writing, spelling, word spacing, and letter size.

Dyscalculia - A learning disability that affects the ability to understand and process numbers and mathematical concepts.

Dyspraxia - A developmental disability that affects the ability to coordinate one’s physical movements using both fine and gross motor skills.

Dyslexia - A learning disability that affects the ability to read and spell words

Neurodiversity - Natural variation in how people’s minds work

Neurodiverse - A word that describes a group that is inclusive of many different neurotypes

Neurodivergent - Mind(s) that function differently from societal norms and expectations

Neurotype - Word used to refer to a specific type of mind. The term refers to the way that a person’s brain is wired to process the world and represents variation among humans.

Neurotypical - A type of brain that is similar to the majority of the human population and conforms to societal norms and expectations.

Insert resource for learning about other mental health conditions that are considered neurodivergent identities.

Sample References

- Burgstahler, S. (2020). *Creating inclusive learning opportunities in higher education: A universal design toolkit* (pp. 47-48). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
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- Thurber, A., & Bandy, J. (2018). *Creating Accessible Learning Environments*. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Retrieved from <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/creating-accessible-learning-environments/>.
- Warrier, V., Greenberg, D.M., Weir, E. et al. Elevated rates of autism, other neurodevelopmental and psychiatric diagnoses, and autistic traits in transgender and gender-diverse individuals. *Nat Commun* 11, 3959 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-17794-1>