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## **Navigating the Frontlines: Advocating for Neurodiverse Students in a Shifting DEI Climate**

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This paper integrates personal narrative, professional practice, and research-based insights to explore the challenges and opportunities in advocating for neurodiverse students, particularly those on the autism spectrum, in a shifting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) climate. Drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Self-Efficacy Theory (SET), this narrative highlights how fostering autonomy and building coalitions coexist to empower neurodiverse students. Through case studies and innovative practices, the paper examines strategies for maintaining inclusive spaces, enhancing resilience, and supporting students' transitions into the workforce despite systemic barriers. This narrative offers actionable recommendations for educators and administrators, emphasizing the transformative potential of creativity, collaboration, and community in sustaining equity in higher education.

*Keywords:* neurodiverse students, DEI, higher education, coalition-building, resilience, autism

## **Introduction**

Over the past decade, my work in higher education has centered on advocating for neurodiverse students, particularly those on the autism spectrum. This advocacy stems from both professional experience and research that underscores the critical importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—foundational components of Self-Determination Theory (SDT)—in supporting student success. Similarly, Self-Efficacy Theory (SET) highlights the transformative role of confidence-building in enabling students to overcome barriers and achieve their goals. These frameworks have guided my efforts to develop programs and practices that empower students while fostering the connections needed to navigate an increasingly challenging DEI climate.

The current landscape is marked by heightened resistance to DEI initiatives, threatening the progress made in creating equitable opportunities for neurodiverse students. The erosion of formal support systems has necessitated a shift toward innovative and insurgent strategies that prioritize student empowerment and community-building. In this narrative, I draw from my research and professional practice to illustrate how coalition-building, resilience, and targeted interventions have enabled students to thrive. Through anonymized case studies, I explored the lived experiences of students whose journeys reveal the power of intentional support and the importance of adapting to systemic challenges.

## **The Role of Research and Theory**

My work with neurodiverse students is deeply informed by both formal research and professional practice. The theoretical frameworks guiding my advocacy and interventions are Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Self-Efficacy Theory (SET). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive lens through which to understand the factors that influence motivation, behavior, and career success for neurodiverse individuals. As articulated in my research, these frameworks emphasize the critical interplay between autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering resilience and long-term success (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Bandura, 1999).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, focuses on the fulfillment of basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—as essential for healthy human functioning and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Deci and Ryan (2000) assert that intrinsic motivation arises when individuals engage in activities for their inherent satisfaction, while extrinsic motivation stems from external rewards or pressures. SDT has been widely applied in fields such as education, employment readiness, and health because of its robust capacity to explain human behavior and its outcomes (Morris et al., 2022). Notably, Deci (1971) demonstrated that external rewards can sometimes diminish intrinsic motivation, laying the groundwork for understanding how autonomy supports sustained engagement and success.

This framework highlights the importance of creating environments where neurodiverse students feel empowered to make choices (autonomy), develop mastery (competence), and connect

meaningfully with others (relatedness). These principles are particularly salient in higher education and career development for students on the autism spectrum. As Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasize, the frustration of these basic needs can lead to negative outcomes, including diminished motivation and well-being. Conversely, meeting these needs fosters resilience, self-efficacy, and long-term success.

Complementing SDT, Self-Efficacy Theory (SET), developed by Albert Bandura, examines how individuals' beliefs in their ability to perform specific tasks influence their motivation, learning, and performance outcomes (Bandura, 1977, 1999). According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is shaped by four sources: enactive mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological or affective states. Strong self-efficacy enables individuals to persevere through challenges, engage proactively in their goals, and remain resilient in the face of adversity (Bandura, 1999).

Bandura (1999) emphasizes that cultivating self-efficacy has profound implications for professional success, as individuals who believe in their abilities are more likely to approach tasks with motivation and commitment. This is particularly relevant for neurodiverse students, who often face systemic barriers and societal stigma that can undermine their confidence. Developing self-efficacy equips these students with the mindset and determination needed to excel in both academic and professional settings.

In my research, the integration of SDT and SET has been instrumental in understanding how structured support systems can empower neurodiverse students. For example, SDT highlights the need to design programs that enhance autonomy and competence, while SET underscores the importance of building confidence through mastery experiences and positive reinforcement. Together, these theories illuminate the critical elements of effective support systems and provide a roadmap for fostering resilience and career readiness.

As applied in my work, these frameworks offer actionable insights for creating inclusive environments that support both the autonomy and community needs of neurodiverse students. Programs that prioritize autonomy, such as peer mentorship or flexible accommodations, allow students to take ownership of their educational and career journeys. At the same time, coalition-building fosters a sense of relatedness by connecting students with supportive networks of faculty, staff, and community partners. This dual focus ensures that neurodiverse students are not only prepared to overcome challenges but are also empowered to thrive.

These theoretical foundations are not abstract; they directly inform the strategies I have implemented to support neurodiverse students. For instance, a mentoring program grounded in SDT principles emphasized fostering autonomy and competence, while creating opportunities for enactive mastery experiences reinforced self-efficacy. The measurable success of this approach underscores the importance of integrating SDT and SET into designing programs that enable neurodiverse students to achieve their full potential.

In practice, integrating SDT and SET provides a blueprint for creating environments that

cultivate both self-efficacy and meaningful connection. For example, mentorship opportunities grounded in student autonomy (SDT) and reinforced by verbal encouragement and mastery experiences (SET) have demonstrated long-term impact on student outcomes. Programs shaped by these theories do more than accommodate; they empower.

### **Coalition-Building and Autonomy: Complementary Forces**

One of the most impactful strategies for supporting neurodiverse students is coalition-building. Partnerships between faculty, staff, administrators, community organizations, and corporate allies create robust networks of support that sustain students, even as formal DEI programs face challenges. These coalitions provide essential resources, advocacy, and opportunities that are often inaccessible through traditional institutional systems. Simultaneously, fostering autonomy remains a central goal in empowering neurodiverse students. Rather than being contradictory, coalition-building and autonomy coexist in a complementary relationship: coalition creates the scaffolding that enables students to develop self-advocacy and independence.

For instance, a partnership with a corporate entity funded a program designed specifically to support autistic computer science majors. This initiative offered mentoring, job shadowing, and internships, allowing students to gain professional experience while navigating the complexities of workplace dynamics. Beyond the immediate benefits, these experiences equipped students with critical skills and the confidence needed to advocate for their needs and aspirations in professional environments. As a result, employment and internship placements for participating students increased by an impressive 99%, underscoring the transformative impact of targeted partnerships.

These collaborations exemplify how coalition-building extends beyond providing direct services to foster environments where students can thrive autonomously. By aligning community efforts with institutional priorities, these initiatives create a bridge between structured support and self-determination. Neurodiverse students are empowered to take ownership of their academic and career trajectories, demonstrating that coalition-building and autonomy are not only compatible but essential for fostering long-term success.

### **Case Studies: The Human Impact**

The success of neurodiverse students is best understood through the lens of their lived experiences, which highlight the triumphs and challenges they face as they navigate higher education and transition into the workforce. The following anonymized case studies, drawn from both professional observations and my research, provide a detailed exploration of these journeys. These narratives emphasize the role of resilience, adaptability, and structured support systems in fostering career readiness and professional success.

#### **Case Study 1: Elliot – Resilience in the Face of Challenges**

Elliot, a 23-year-old nonbinary psychology major, exemplifies the intersection of resilience and

adaptability. After realizing that graduate school was not the right path, Elliot embarked on a challenging job search within the highly competitive field of psychology. Despite submitting over 30 applications and facing repeated rejection, Elliot remained committed to their goals.

Elliot described the emotional toll of the process, stating:

"Each rejection made the stress and worry worse. It was like hitting a wall over and over again. But I knew I had to be flexible. I started looking at my transferable skills and exploring alternative job paths."

Elliot's willingness to reframe setbacks as learning opportunities and pivot toward new possibilities reflects the adaptability required to overcome systemic barriers. By leveraging transferable skills and seeking out mentorship, Elliot eventually secured a position that aligned with their strengths and long-term career aspirations. Their story underscores the importance of personalized support in helping neurodiverse individuals navigate the complexities of professional pathways.

### **Case Study 2: Kai – Leveraging Autism Support Programs for Career Readiness**

Kai, a 26-year-old education major, benefited significantly from an integrated autism support program during their college years. This program included tailored career services, such as mock interviews and resume-building workshops, which bolstered Kai's confidence and enhanced their professional communication skills.

Reflecting on the program's impact, Kai shared:

"The career center felt like having a superhero team in my corner. Those mock interviews were a game-changer, not just for the interviews themselves but for how I saw myself as a professional. They gave me the confidence to set goals and go after them."

Through these structured interventions, Kai secured a teaching position aligned with their passion for education. This case illustrates how autism support programs can play a transformative role in preparing students for professional environments, equipping them with both the technical skills and self-efficacy needed for long-term success.

### **Case Study 3: Jess – Navigating the Stress of Competitive Fields**

Jess, a 29-year-old computer science major, faced significant anxiety during her job search, particularly around pre-interview technical exams required by many employers in her field. The competitive nature of the tech industry compounded her stress, leading to moments of self-doubt.

Jess described her experience:

"The stress of pre-interview exams made me question if I was even in the right field. But with support from the autism program and career services, I learned to focus on my strengths and approach each challenge as a learning opportunity."

Through personalized guidance, Jess was able to refine her resume, practice for technical assessments, and secure a position that matched her skills and interests. Her journey highlights the importance of targeted support for neurodiverse students navigating high-pressure industries.

#### **Case Study 4: Casey – Overcoming Social Anxiety in the Workplace**

Casey, a 26-year-old education major, initially struggled with social anxiety as she transitioned into the professional world. Despite this, she persevered through numerous interviews and rejection letters, eventually securing a role at a nonprofit organization that aligned with her values.

Casey reflected on her journey:

"Every interview was like climbing a mountain. The anxiety was overwhelming at times, but I took it one step at a time. I pushed myself out of my comfort zone, and each small success built my confidence."

Casey's experience demonstrates the role of resilience in overcoming personal challenges and finding fulfillment in a career. Her story also highlights the need for institutions to provide mental health support as part of their career services for neurodiverse students.

#### **Case Study 5: Jay – Balancing Ambition and Adaptability**

Jay, a 32-year-old computer science major, navigated a highly competitive job market while grappling with the decision to disclose his autism to potential employers. This decision became a turning point in his career, as it allowed him to advocate for necessary accommodations and approach his work with authenticity.

Jay recounted:

"Disclosure was one of the hardest decisions I've ever made, but it was also the most empowering. It allowed me to fully embrace who I am and ask for what I needed to succeed."

Through mentorship and networking, Jay secured an internship in cybersecurity, which evolved into a full-time role. His story exemplifies how self-advocacy, combined with institutional support, can lead to meaningful career achievements for neurodiverse individuals.

### **Innovative Practices in a Shifting Climate**

In an era where DEI initiatives are increasingly under threat, the need for innovative and insurgent practices has never been more critical. Institutions must develop creative solutions that address the unique challenges faced by neurodiverse students while circumventing systemic barriers. One such approach involves leveraging digital tools to create accessible, on-demand resources that ensure continuity of support. For example, online platforms offering tailored guidance on resume building, interview preparation, and career exploration provide neurodiverse students with the

autonomy to access support on their own terms, reducing their reliance on institutional systems that may be unreliable.

Partnerships with nonprofit organizations and corporate allies also serve as a vital component of insurgent strategies. Collaborations, such as those that provide internships, mentorship opportunities, and specialized training programs for neurodiverse students, can bridge gaps left by diminishing institutional DEI resources. These partnerships not only expand opportunities for students but also foster a culture of inclusion within the broader community.

Additionally, programs that prioritize peer mentorship offer a cost-effective and impactful way to support students. These initiatives provide a dual benefit: they create a sense of community while empowering neurodiverse students to develop the skills and confidence needed for self-advocacy. Collectively, these practices demonstrate that even in a constrained DEI climate, creativity and collaboration can sustain meaningful progress.

### **Resilience in the Face of Adversity**

Resilience is often associated with the students we serve, but it is equally critical for those of us advocating on their behalf. The dismantling of DEI structures demands that educators, administrators, and policymakers remain steadfast in their commitment to equity and inclusion, even in the face of systemic opposition.

This includes recognizing and replicating practices that have proven successful. For example, when Elliot faced repeated rejection in a competitive field, his persistence was amplified by access to mentorship and peer support. Institutions can replicate this success by ensuring students have regular access to skill-building workshops and consistent check-ins with trusted mentors. These types of wraparound supports do not require major financial investment but can yield long-term returns in student confidence and outcomes.

Advocacy resilience also involves adaptability. Jess's story illustrates how technical interview preparation—often overlooked in DEI conversations—can be the determining factor in job placement. By reimagining what “career preparation” includes for neurodiverse students, we can create flexible and realistic programming that reflects their specific industry needs.

One of the most challenging yet rewarding aspects of this work is witnessing how small, intentional interventions can create lasting change. Even when DEI structures falter, the power of personalized support can be transformative. Ultimately, resilience in advocacy is about more than persistence—it is about leveraging insights from students' lived experiences and applying them to institutional practices. Even small shifts, when rooted in research and real outcomes, can have profound effects.

## **Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders**

In response to the shifting landscape of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education, it is imperative that institutions adopt adaptive and proactive strategies to support the success of neurodiverse students. Central to this effort is the intentional cultivation of environments grounded in the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Self-Efficacy Theory (SET), which emphasize autonomy, competence, and confidence-building as essential elements of student development. Higher education leaders must prioritize both individual empowerment and systemic inclusion. This begins with fostering student autonomy through flexible accommodations, peer mentorship, and individualized career guidance—tools that enhance self-advocacy and encourage personal goal setting. Equally important is the formation of cross-departmental and community-based coalitions, which establish sustainable networks of support. These collaborative efforts serve to counterbalance the dismantling of formal DEI structures by expanding resource access and reinforcing institutional commitment to inclusion.

To ensure sustained support, coalition-building should be embraced as a cornerstone of inclusion. By fostering networks that unite faculty, staff, administrators, and external partners, institutions can create a community that works collaboratively to uphold inclusive practices, even in the absence of robust DEI policies. These alliances provide essential advocacy and resources, creating a safety net that bolsters neurodiverse students' sense of belonging and access to support, regardless of changes in institutional policies.

In parallel, higher education leaders must adopt insurgent practices to counter the constraints posed by limited DEI resources. This could include leveraging digital tools to promote accessibility, such as creating online hubs for resources and community engagement, which can offer continuous support irrespective of institutional funding shifts. Additionally, forming partnerships with nonprofits and advocacy organizations can provide external resources, supplementing institutional support for neurodiverse students. By employing such creative strategies, institutions can protect and even expand their commitment to inclusion in ways that transcend traditional funding models.

Finally, a deliberate focus on career readiness is crucial to bridging the gap between education and meaningful employment for neurodiverse students. Leaders should prioritize the development of comprehensive career preparation programs that include tailored mentorship, internship placements, and partnerships with employers who understand and value neurodiversity. By supporting students as they transition into the workforce, these initiatives contribute to long-term success, ensuring that neurodiverse graduates are not only academically prepared but also equipped with the confidence and skills to thrive professionally.

## **Conclusion**

As the anti-DEI climate intensifies, higher education institutions are at a crossroads. The responsibility to support neurodiverse students and other marginalized groups has never been more

urgent. Despite the systemic challenges, there is immense potential for creativity, collaboration, and resilience to sustain progress and carve out spaces of inclusion.

Through coalition-building, innovative practices, and a steadfast commitment to equity, institutions can continue to empower neurodiverse students to thrive. These efforts must prioritize both individual empowerment and collective responsibility, recognizing that success is achieved not only through institutional policies but through the shared dedication of educators, administrators, and community allies.

The stories of students like Elliot, Jess, Kai, and others remind us that small interventions can yield profound impacts. They demonstrate the transformative power of mentorship, adaptability, and resilience in overcoming barriers and achieving meaningful success. As we move forward, let us remain focused on the vision of a more inclusive future—one where every student, regardless of their neurodiversity or background, has the opportunity to succeed and contribute to the world in meaningful ways. Through collective action and an unwavering belief in the potential of every student, we can rise to the challenge and uphold the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

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