

# Partnering for Success

## Understanding Neurodiversity, Autism and Inclusive Practices in the Classroom



**Jeff Higginbotham**, Faculty Coordinator, SAS

**Michelle Farnam**, Counselor, SAS

**Terrence Shaw**, Director, Student Life & Leadership

# Acknowledgments

- Students
- Colleagues
- Van Ethan Levy, Associate Faculty & Licensed Mental Health Counselor:
  - Van shares their experience and insights as an autistic person.
  - 4/11/25 Flex Presentation (approx. 1.5 hours): "Supporting Neurodiverse Students: Insights & Strategies for Faculty & Staff"



# Agenda



- Understanding Neurodiversity and Autism
- Strategies to support learning and engagement
- Campus resources and collaborative problem-solving
- Questions & Answers

# What is Neurodiversity?



- The idea that neurological differences are natural human variation.
- Includes: Autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, mental health variations, etc.
- Moves away from deficit-based framing.

# What is Neurodiversity?

One of the most promising developments ... has been the emergence of the concept of neurodiversity: the notion that conditions like autism, dyslexia, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should be regarded as naturally occurring cognitive variations with distinctive strengths that have contributed to the evolution of technology and culture rather than mere checklists of deficits and dysfunctions.”

– Steve Silberman, NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity

**Takeaway:** Autism is not a disorder to be fixed. It is a natural form of human neurological variation.



# **Why Autism Matters in This Conversation**

- Neurodiversity reminds us that students learn, communicate, and engage in different ways. There isn't one "normal" learner.
- Autism is a key part of this conversation because structure, communication, and sensory environments can either reduce or create educational barriers for students.
- We're focusing on autism today because we're observing more autistic students enrolled in college. Intentional teaching and communication strategies can make a meaningful difference.

# STUDENT POPULATION

## Students reported with Autism as Primary Disability Type

According to CCCCO Datamart



### Statewide DSPS (SAS)

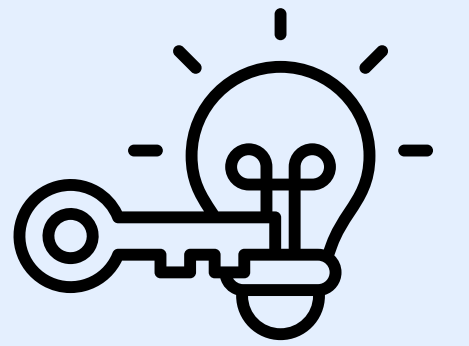
2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
12,351	13,992	15,504

### MiraCosta College (SAS)

2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
149	160	209

Across the CCCCO system and MiraCosta College, headcount for autistic students has steadily increased, reflecting state and national trends toward expanding access to postsecondary education.

# Autism Spectrum: Key Characteristics



## DIFFERENCES IN SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

May interpret language literally.  
Difficulty understanding indirect cues, sarcasm, or implied meanings.

## SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFERENCES

Heightened sensitivity to sounds, lights, textures, or smells.  
Sensory overload can lead to stress or emotional dysregulation.

## REPETITIVE BEHAVIORS AND ROUTINES

Need for predictability and structure.  
May engage in repetitive movements or speech (stimming) for self-regulation.

## FOCUSED INTERESTS

Intense interest in specific topics. Can lead to difficulty shifting attention.

## DIFFERENCES IN REGULATION

Responses to changes may be interpreted as "blunt" or "intense", without intending harm.

# Student Strengths You May Observe

## Non-exhaustive List

- Average to above average intellect.
- Sustained attention and strong motivation.
- Strong pursuit of knowledge within areas of interest.
- Strengths in visual-spatial, pattern-based or systems learning.
- Recall for factual, structured or detail-oriented info.
- Distinct analytical perspectives



# Common Challenges Faced in College Courses

- Sensory sensitivity
- Unspoken social expectations
- Sharing spaces
- Changes in routine
- Initiating/maintaining relationships
- Planning/organization
- Communicating needs
- Group work
- Unstructured environments



# Student Behaviors You Might Observe

(in person, online, emails, discussion boards)

## Social Communication Differences:

- Variation in eye contact, gestures or non-verbal communication.
- Preference for direct or literal language; sarcasm may be missed.
- Reading or responding to implicit social cues.

## Self-Regulation Differences:

- Visible regulation strategies (movement, pacing, stimming).
- Temporary withdrawal or reduced interaction during stress or overload.
- Emotional responses associated with sensory or cognitive load.

## Processing and Sensory Differences:

- Heightened sensitivity to sound, light or environment.
- Delayed response time, especially for complex information.
- Overload in busy or fast-paced settings.

**BEHAVIOR CAN BE VIEWED AS COMMUNICATION. WHAT DO YOU PERCEIVE THE STUDENT'S BEHAVIOR TO BE COMMUNICATING?**

Stress, frustration, sadness, excitement?

# What it May Look Like & What it May Actually Reflect

- Limited or avoidant eye contact → Active listening or sensory regulation
- Minimal verbal participation → Processing time or preference for auditory learning
- Fidgeting, movement or stimming → Self-regulation and sustaining attention
- Leaving class early → Sensory management
- Verbal outburst → Overload, not defiance, aggression or lack of control



# Strategies to Support Learning and Engagement

## Strategy #1: Increase Clarity

### Spell Out Rules Completely

- Faculty Tip: *"No eating in class as it distracts others and affects participation. Please stay until break"*

### Set Clear Boundaries

- Faculty Tip: *"You can call between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM. If you email, I will try to respond within 24 hours."*

### Encourage Clarifying Questions

- Faculty Tip: *"If anything is unclear, please ask me during my office hours or raise your hand in class."*



# Strategies to Support Learning and Engagement

## Strategy #2: Course Engagement

**Create opportunities to learn more about student(s).**

- Faculty Tip: Create a survey or ask student to send you an email responding to questions:
  - *"How do you learn best?", "What can I do to support your learning?", and/or "What would you like me to know about you?"*

**Student may have difficulty with test taking or verbal participation.**

- Faculty Tip: Offer options to demonstrate learning like discussion boards, video responses, lower stakes time quizzes/exams.

**Student might be challenged with group work (interpreting social cues).**

- Faculty Tip: Provide explicit roles for group members and timelines for group tasks.



# Strategy #2: Course Engagement

## *Suggestions for use of Canvas*

**Student may become overwhelmed if homepage has unclear navigation or has too much information displayed.**

- Faculty Tip: Use a simple, consistent layout with clear module titles and descriptions. Avoid multiple steps to arrive at intended information. Make sure dates are correct.

**Student may be confused with when and how to submit work.**

- Faculty Tip: Provide detailed assignment instructions with examples (ex. "Submit as PDF by Friday at 5 PM.")

**Difficulty processing large blocks of text.**

- Faculty Tip: Use bullet points and headings. Break long text into smaller sections.

**Student may not know when to reach you.**

- Faculty Tip: Post office hours and response time expectations in syllabus AND Canvas.

**Student may be unsure how to communicate in Discussions.**

- Faculty Tip: Post clear guidelines. For example, "Keep comments respectful and focused on the topic. Start by acknowledging the point you're responding to before adding your own thoughts."

# Strategies to Support Learning and Engagement

## Strategy #3: Sensory & Environment Considerations

*Behavior is communication. Assume good intentions.*

Student shows signs of sensory overload (rocking, covering ears, repetitive movement).

- Faculty Tip: Allow use of headphones, sunglasses, fidgets and promote use of breaks. Try to normalize healthy responses to stress.

**Escalation during loud or chaotic moments.**

- Faculty Tip: Avoid saying, "calm down". Model breathing and continue teaching without escalating the situation. If significant, suggest the class take a break. Check in privately after class or during the break. For example, "I noticed you \_\_\_\_\_ loudly a few times during class. I just wanted to check in and make sure everything's okay. I appreciate your enthusiasm, and I want to make sure I'm supporting your learning and everyone can focus."



**If the student repeatedly comments loudly, offer alternatives, such as requesting they raise their hand before speaking so everyone can follow along.**



# Strategies to Support Learning and Engagement

## Strategy #4: Communications & Interactions

**Student may misinterpret vague feedback.**

- Faculty Tip: Use short, clear phrases and avoid long explanations. Less is more.

**You observe a student escalates during public correction.**

- Faculty Tip: Use private, calm conversations instead of public call-outs.

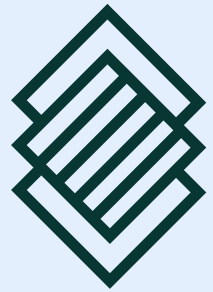
**Clarifying or repeated questions feels argumentative.**

- Faculty Tip: Respond neutrally and thank the student for checking their understanding.

**Student may have difficulty interpreting tone or sarcasm.**

- Faculty Tip: Avoid sarcasm. Keep communication direct and literal. For example, "Wow, I just love getting papers at 2:00 a.m." , can be interpreted to mean the instructor actually likes late submissions.

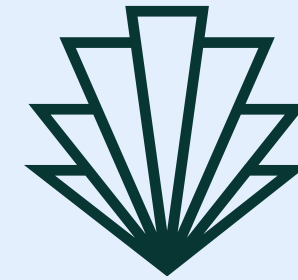
# Key Takeaways



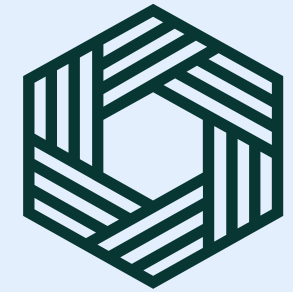
Clear  
expectations +  
consistency



Engagement  
reduces  
disruptions



Communication  
and rapport  
matter

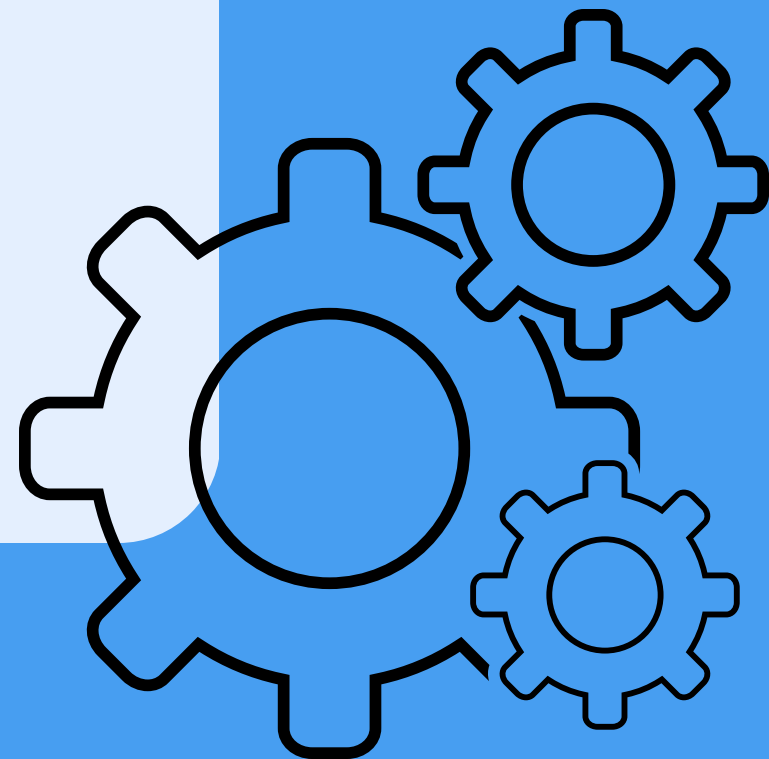


Flexibility and  
inclusion  
improve  
outcomes

# Supporting Students in the Classroom

## Practical Tools for Faculty

- Sample email scripts advising student about observed behavior. Inviting student to meet after class during office hours.
- How to explain diversity to a classmate if they bring a concern regarding distractions to the instructor.
- Faculty can consult counselors for support strategies.



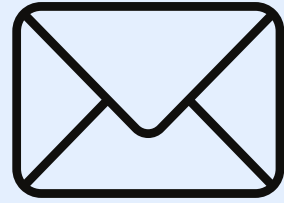
# Examples of Recommended Language

# Sample Course Introduction:

Hello and welcome to (Name of Class)!

In this class, we all learn and participate in different ways and that's something we value. You might notice that engagement looks different for each person, and that's okay. If you ever need support or have questions about how I can make this class work well for you, please feel free to reach out to me privately (insert preferred methods of contact). My goal is for everyone to feel comfortable and be successful here.





# Sample Email #1

*Reaching out related to your observed behavior of concern*

Hi (Student Name),

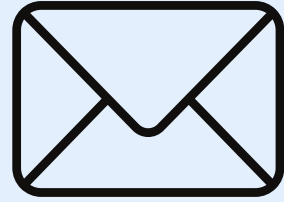
I hope you're doing well! I wanted to check in and see if we could find a time to talk about how things are going in class. My goal is to make sure you feel comfortable and supported while learning.

I've noticed a few things in class (for example: "movement", "verbal responses", "loud laughter" or "frequent comments"; be specific, keep factual and neutral). I want to better understand your experience and I want to do what I can to support your learning in this course.

My goal is to connect, listen, and see if there are strategies we can put in place to help you feel comfortable and successful in class while maintaining a positive learning environment for everyone.

If my office hours don't work for you, please let me know a day and time that does. I will be as flexible as I can to find a time that works best for us.

Looking forward to connecting!



# Sample Email #2

## *Improvement observed*

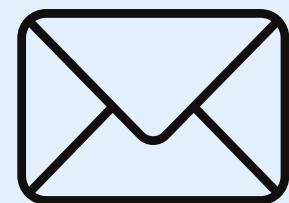
Hi (Student Name),

I wanted to follow up after our recent conversation to thank you for taking the time to meet with me.

I've noticed positive changes in class since we met, and I appreciate the effort you've been making. I wanted to acknowledge that and let you know it hasn't gone unnoticed.

If you ever have questions, feedback, or want to check in again about how things are going in the course, please feel free to connect with me after class or during office hours. I'm happy to continue working together to support your success.

Thanks again, and I hope the rest of your week goes well.



## **Sample Email #3**

*Responding to student reporting impact upon their learning*

Hi (Student Name),

Thank you for sharing your concerns. Some students express themselves differently, and that's part of having a diverse classroom. If it's affecting your focus, let's meet to talk about options, like seating changes or other ideas that may help improve your learning.

If my office hours don't work for you, please let me know a day and time that does. I will be as flexible as I can to find a time that works best for us.

# When to Refer a Student to SAS



- Student requests an accommodation and they don't provide you an Accommodation Form from MiraCosta College SAS.
- Student reports challenges with their health.
- Parent or guardian reaches out to you to let you know the student has a disability or received accommodations during high school.
- A student expresses they are repeatedly struggling with material. Try to find a pattern through use of a follow-up question. For example, *"This is a class that has a lot of (math, writing or reading). Have you had difficulty during the past with (math, writing or reading)?"*

# Accommodation vs. Conduct: When and Who to Collaborate With



## COLLABORATE WITH SAS WHEN:

- Student provides SAS Accommodation Form and you have questions.
- You observe confusion around expectations and your efforts have not been successful.
- You feel stuck or unsure about next steps.

## COLLABORATE WITH CONDUCT WHEN:

- Behavior is disruptive, aggressive, or violates classroom expectations.
- You observe legitimate safety concerns.
- You have established boundaries and the student repeatedly does not adhere to them.



# Student Conduct Team



**Nick, Mortaloni, Ed.D, LCSW**

Dean of Student Affairs



**Mitra De Souza**

Director of Student Services  
Community Learning Center



**Terrence Shaw**

Director of Student Life &  
Leadership  
Oceanside Campus



**Colleen Maeder**

Director of Student Services  
San Elijo Campus

# How to Respond to Student Concerns & Challenges



<https://miracosta.instructure.com/enroll/9RKN7E>

**A RESOURCE FOR FACULTY &  
STAFF**

MIRACOSTA  
COLLEGE



# **Q&A**

## **Session**

# Contact us:

## STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES (SAS)

**Phone:** 760.795.6658

**Email:** SAS@miracosta.edu

**Instagram:** @mcc\_sas

## STUDENT LIFE AND LEADERSHIP

**Phone:** 760.795.6890

**Email:** SLL@miracosta.edu

**Instagram:** @mcc4studentlife and @mccsanlife

