

Rise, Teach, Learn - Season 3 Episode 5

Neurodiversity in Higher Education

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We acknowledge and are mindful that CSU Chico stands on lands that were originally occupied by the first people of this area, the Mechoopda, and we recognize their distinctive spiritual relationship with this land and the waters that run through campus. We are humbled that our campus resides upon sacred lands that once sustained the Mechoopda people for centuries.

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Welcome to the Rise, Teach, Learn Podcast. I am Dr. Chiara Ferrari, Director of Faculty Development at Chico State, and we are happy to make this resource available to our campus community and beyond. The podcast is hosted by Dr. Jamie Linn Gunderson and she will engage in timely conversations with faculty, staff, and students and give you a taste of the Chico experience. Subscribe to our podcast and explore the many resources available on our website. Thank you for listening.

00:58

Hello, and welcome to rise teach learn. I'm your host Jamie Gunderson. In this episode, we will explore neurodiversity, discuss strategies that support all learners. And we will hear from Dr. Josie Blagrove and Assistant Professor in the Department of Kinesiology and the Autism Clinic director, Dr. Charley Turner, a professor in the Political Science and Criminal Justice Department, and Betina Wildhaber, a Career Center Counselor at Chico State.

01:28

All right, I am so excited to be doing an episode on neurodivergent learners in the post secondary classroom. This is a topic that is near and dear to my heart because I am a former K 12 special education teacher. But before we dive in too deep into our episode, let's take a moment to define neurodiversity and to talk about what it might look like in the post secondary classroom.

01:53

Essentially, a great way to define neuro diversity is kind of how we vary in our neuro cognitive ability. I like to think of it in a way that our brains are wired a little differently and how we might process information or the world a slightly differently. There are certain like diagnosis that generally fall underneath the category of neurodiversity. So just to paint a little bit of a picture of who those individuals might be, would be somebody with ADHD. Someone who's autistic, dyslexic has dyspraxia, dyscalculia may have Tourette Syndrome, it can also include even like mental health or acquired brain injury. So there's kind of this umbrella of general diagnostics that, that fall underneath that define how our brains are wired just a little differently and how we think. Also, I want to emphasize that neurodiversity and itself, like the neurodiversity movement, we should say, is not only to bring awareness, but it's, it's primarily to build the acceptance that we all think a little differently and process the world a little differently. Neurodiversity can be referred to as like invisible disabilities and innocence, right? We don't, we can't really see them. And so the CDC is actually predicting that we have about

50,000 Students, autistic students that are going to be entering college in the next decade. And I know that autism is just one right diagnosis that falls underneath the neurodiversity spectrum. And so that gives us a sense of kind of what we're anticipating, like in the next 10 years of what the population that's going to be entering into our university system.

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The other statistics that can help paint a picture of what we might be experiencing just even here at the Chico State campus is looking at the statistics of students and this is you know, we can only really pull statistics from students that are being served from the ARC, our Accessibility Resource Center. And so just to give you an idea in Fall 2020, the, and I just have a couple of diagnosis here like for example the autistic population on campus. The ARC was serving 42 students in Fall 2020 and almost doubled to 77 and Fall 21. And as we continue to go through other diagnosis like ADHD, learning disabilities acquired brain injury, we literally the numbers literally double in a year for the amount of students that the ARC is serving. Now when we look at just who the ARC is serving, that's not including other individuals who are on our campus that are not connected with ARC. And so what we can do is look at this national statistics. And so I'll take the Autistic community for example. So nationwide, we can anticipate one to 2% of our population as autistic. Chico State is serving like .5% right as of like Fall 21. So there's there's still a large population that we can assume is on campus that we are not reaching. Another example would be like learning disability. So there's several diagnosis that kind of fall underneath that category. We're serving about 2.2% of students as of Fall 21 through ARC. But if we were just to take the diagnosis of like dyslexia, it's 10% of our of our population, or dyspraxia is another 10% of our population. So, again, we can only make that assumption that we're missing individuals that are on our campus who are not connected with ARC, that are also maybe needing support, and they just don't know it and in a way, or ways that we can adjust how we present information in our classrooms that can just best support the varied thinkers that we have on campus. One more statistic that I'll throw out there just to, again, paint paint, that picture of what we have on campus, is that the Center for Student Success Research through UMass have an article that they state, about 80% of students might be experiencing some kind of disabling environment on campus at some point, right. So that's a really large number. And so taking all these numbers into account, we can get a general idea of what we could be facing on our own campus. But ultimately, we need some more research to really pin down kind of some of those exact numbers on our campus.

06:37

So Betina, I noticed that you refer to people with these types of neuro diversities as autistic people, instead of the traditional person first language that I was taught in my special education background, can we explore the preference of what one would like to be called?

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So I was thinking about the idea of neurodiversity, as you were talking, and how it really is actually embedded in like the social justice movement with disability rights. And so I think that that is a setup in how we could discuss it when it comes to why we're intentionally using identity first language instead of people first language, because most folks that are neurodivergent, and actually a lot more people with disabilities in general now prefer identity first, because they see their disability as part of themselves and something that can't be separated.

07:27

Yeah, it really is, like, that preference of, Am I somebody who has this thing? Or am I owning that I'm an autistic person, or the neurodivergent community has created a community around it similar to the deaf community. And so they have their own language and mores and different ways of going about things, and really see it as an identity and a culture. Sometimes will ask like, what are your pronouns? Right? And so it really is on the individual? Would you prefer to say that you are John with autism? Or would you prefer that you're saying that you're an autistic, right and an individual, so it really kind of determines the person that you're talking to you also.

08:09

I have a lot less expertise in this area than Josie and Betina do because I have not been studying this for years and years. But as either a person with autism or an autistic person, I can tell you, I'm in a lot of Facebook groups for autism, and this conversation comes up a lot. And there's like a small group of people who care strongly this way. And there's a small group that care strongly this way. And then most of us just think it's funny that this is the conversation cause we don't really care one way or the other. We're just glad that you know, these, these things are getting attention these days.

08:53

I love that we had this conversation that because I feel like I've just learned and the idea that it's just like a pronoun that the onus is on the person and their preference. That's kind of enlightening to me, just given my training to always I mean, they were like person first, it's person first.

09:09

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, it's been beat in to us in the educational system. And then you have heard of like the medical model too, right? Like, all these bad and we shouldn't accept it or think about it any other way other than curing it or fixing it or making it fit in so, or we could own it.

09:25

Let's go into this idea of discussing disability as an Equity Diversity and Inclusion issue. Right. This might be students with disabilities, our largest minority population, and we're not always including these groups in these conversations about equity, diversity and inclusion.

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I think that there is a lot of intersectionality within disabilities. So you can be disabled or neurodivergent and also have, be another minority group in any area, right, culturally socio-economically different gender identities. And so I think that disability just kind of gets set aside as only like a disability like being served under ARC. And these individuals don't have a place in any other areas on our campus. And if you don't see other people that look like you in leadership or pure role models or any of that, it's really hard to understand like where you fit in or like not be seen, right. So all the other minority groups that we can think about on campus, there's a very strong, intentional visual representation in the media, we push out in the pictures that are on campus and who we bring to campus, right. But then when we move over to this disability idea, it's like, oh, well, we're serving them in ARC. And that's it, and they can fit into another space. And I think that that's a huge disservice to the students. And it really affects

equity gaps, it really affects our graduation rates, you know, part of our mission statement of, you know, individuals and groups, we're going to serve under the strategic priorities. But then it really isn't, at least in my opinion, a priority when we really break it down.

11:00

You bring up a lot of really great points. Let's talk about the CSU response to neuro diversity. Where are we currently?

11:07

I would say, currently, with the CSU system, we're still in the process of learning what that means, right? I think we're at a very baseline level of understanding. The UC system recently put out a recommendations and priorities letter and guidelines to serving autistic and neurodivergent students within their system. And I, to the best of my knowledge, know, that that has not happened yet for this for the CSU system. So I think we're still in a space of learning and trying to understand what that means and how we would help and better support these students.

11:45

Josie you make really great points. Can you tell us a little bit about some of the actions that you've taken on campus and studying this and moving this work forward?

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Yeah. So I've done a study, CSU wide, that's looked at students with disabilities, and their perceptions of their experience and how they're served. It was through the lens of basic need, but I was able to tie in some other questions about how they're experiencing campus. And also here on this campus last fall, a lot of faculty and staff participated in a study that I did with Dr. Rebecca Lytle, where we just examined how faculty and staff feel about, like what their confidence level is in their interactions with those students who are autistic, we swung it specifically autistic, because the idea of neuro divergence and neuro divergent thinkers seemed like such a broad topic to try to tackle in a first survey for things. So one of the things we found out with that CSU wide study, we had over 600 students from 16 campuses that gave their opinions about what's going on for them. And overall, it kind of paints a pretty bleak picture. And so I think this is important in thinking about how we're looking at disability as a whole big picture. And then also like, specifically for those who are neurodivergent, right, so we're kind of talking about two different topics.

13:10

But over 25% of students with disabilities felt as though they weren't part of campus. And I think that's a really huge thing to think about. Because when we're looking at equity gaps, and thinking about how to improve graduation rates, if we have 25% of this group of students feeling like they don't belong, that is not going to make them want to stay or really put in the energy to try. A majority of those students who reported that also had other intersecting identities. So they were, there was a lot of students of color who were sharing that perspective. And there were a lot of students from varying socio-economic groups, the lower end of that, clearly, were thinking that that was not, you know, they didn't feel like they were part of campus. They did think that their faculty were trying to support them, which I thought was important. But they also thought that faculty didn't have the experience or support to support them

well, but I think that's an important thing to think about. So overall, these students really had more positive interactions with faculty than not, but they knew that they weren't being served as well. Like you can't just give someone all this enthusiasm, who has a disability expect them as a, you know, student and you're the faculty member that they're just going to magically pass class if you don't have what you need training wise or support wise, to help the student. This group of students was also a really high achieving group included, there's a bias in that sample, we can all agree to that right. If you're going to the steps to complete this survey, you have the bandwidth and the capabilities to do that. But 90% of them were passing their classes that semester, so that would have been Spring of 2020. When that was the, this data, these data were coming out and so they were really confident in that ability. So similar to how the students perceived the faculty in the CSU wide study. faculty on campus wanted overwhelmingly to be able to support students that are autistic, but at least 55% of them felt that they didn't have the tools or the resources to do that. So I think that that's a really important thing that we're seeing from both the student side and the faculty side is how we can come together and better support our students in the classrooms.

15:24

Thank you for that work Josie, you make mention of the resources and training that a faculty might need. So as is the goal of this podcast, we want to focus on application, what can faculty do in their courses, right today, to promote this equity, this diversity, this inclusion, specific to our neurodivergent or autistic learners. So Charlie, I'm gonna throw it to you and hoping you can give us some good ideas about tips, tricks and tools that we can use to support our learners.

15:55

Sure, thanks, Jamie, I think what occurs to me is there are a couple of places where a faculty member can communicate this sense of support pretty clearly. One is in the syllabus, and the other is in the first week of class. And I think the same sort of thing can happen in both places. The most important is simply acknowledgement. You know, I have always said to students, that first week of class, hey, if you are, you know, XY and Z, please come talk to me, I want to make sure that we're planning ahead of time for any changes that we might need to encounter later in the semester. And traditionally, that X, Y and Z has been things like student athletes, people, you know, students who are involved in Model United Nations, students who are registered with ARC for any any reason. And it's just been a way of anticipating, hey, you're going to be gone later in the semester, or, Hey, you're going to need more time on the midterm Are you going to want to take that in in a different setting than in this classroom. But I think just including in that sort of treat that normal list that we have things like neuro divergence, just acknowledging to the class that Hey, you there may be autistic students in this room, there may be students with ADHD or with some other form of neuro divergence that that makes their experience a little bit different. And some of those things are pretty easy to take care of, you know, if you need extra time on the quiz, ARCs got a plan for you. Right. And that's pretty straightforward. Because neuro divergence is such an individual experience for everyone who is going through life this way, there are a lot of things we can't anticipate either. And so it really does need to be this conversation that you need to let students know that you're open to having with them.

18:08

An example of something that a faculty member could help with that that ARC really has no plan for, and that there's no way to anticipate is, you know, I teach a lot of classes, in big classrooms that have doors to the outside, as I'm sure a lot of us do. And some of these rooms, that door is really loud when it opens and shuts. And you know, students get up and leave and come back during class. And particularly if it's a windy day, the door slams shut and that can be very jarring. If you're a student who has sensory sensitivities, for example, you are not going to want to sit anywhere near that door. There's really nothing that ARC could write into a plan for you for that. But if you were to come up and let me know that at the beginning of the semester, say, hey, you know, I can't sit over there, I need to sit somewhere else in the classroom, then that's a really easy way that a faculty member can accommodate a need that you have, and it's not disruptive to anyone else. And it's going to make the learning experience better for everyone. There are probably other situations that are harder to address that are going to require maybe some one on one figuring out with a student. You know we've got this project coming up that is going to be challenging for you because of your neuro divergence. You know, just a willingness to work with a student and let them know that, you know, we'll figure out how to, you know, make sure that you get this experience, you know that this is as challenging for you as it is for everyone else in the classroom, but that it's not a special burden on you to greater than it is for the other students as much as possible to. I think just letting students know that we want them to succeed can be very powerful.

20:08

Some other things that we might anticipate possibly being more challenging for neurodivergent students would be things like changing up routine, I think there's been a lot written recently about oh, students don't read the syllabus, well, this is probably not true of your autistic students, they probably read every word of the syllabus and expect you to stick to it. So if you're going to switch things up, you might think of that, you know, as a faculty member, as oh, this is going to be fun for the students, it may not be fun for all the students. So you might want to think about that a little bit in, which is not to say that it's never okay to be spontaneous. But just to know that, if you, for example, have told students that they need to give a short class presentation one day, and then at the last minute, you say, Oh, you don't have to do that this today, you can do that next week. Instead, that you might actually be creating a great deal of unnecessary stress for students, or at least for some students.

21:16

And then the other thing that comes up sometimes is the idea of, of group work. And I know that probably a lot of students for a variety of reasons, complain about having to work on group projects, but just be sensitive to the fact that for some students, it's not just that they don't want to do that work, but that they actually have some challenges in social communication, that makes it difficult for them to navigate a social situation, and to pick up on either nonverbal or verbal clues that the other members of their group might be giving them. Which, again, is not to say don't assign group projects, but rather think through how you do that. Some strategies that I think are probably productive would be to try to assign very specific group roles for the different members. And to write out either in a rubric or you know, a very clear Assignment Description, what your expectations of each of the group members might be, that makes it a little more formalized, and requires a little less guesswork on the part of the neurodivergent student. One other thing I might say is that, while ARC does incredibly helpful things for students who seek out their assistance, there are going to be an art neurodivergent students on our

campus who either do not think of themselves as needing an accommodation from ARC, or who might not even, you know, have any sort of formal diagnosis or even be aware or identify themselves as neurodivergent. And so a lot of the things that we talked about as being open to meeting students where they are and helping them with their needs lies really much more broadly than just to people who you know, the data show us are, you know, fit into a particular category. These are practices that are going to help students across campus by helping neurodivergent students, you're actually probably helping out everybody else in the class as well.

23:39

And there you have it, folks. Today we explored neuro diversity and discussed strategies, tips and tricks that faculty and staff can think about when designing their courses. I'd like to thank our guests, Drs. Josie Blagrove and Charley Turner, as well as Betina Wildhaber for their contributions to this episode. I encourage you to check out our neuro diversity in higher education teaching Guide for more information and resources. And don't forget that you can access previous episodes of Rise, Teach, Learn, as well as all of the resources associated with this and other episodes on our FDEV podcast web page. A big thank you to you for listening and until next time, we got this Wildcats!