ARTICLE
Neurodiversity in the Minds of Students: From Perception to Campus Programming

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Neurodiversity is a social justice movement at the nexus of neuroscience, academia, and public policy. A contemporary view of neurodiversity is one that embraces neurological differences, encompassing all "neurotypes," including more specific identifiers like autistic or dyslexic. The goal of this study was to investigate student awareness and perception of neurodiversity since they are the next generation of public policy makers. Students enrolled in Introduction to Behavioral Neuroscience (N=146) were exposed to different information sources (popular, academic, TED talk, or choose/find their own) on the topic of neurodiversity. They then wrote a paper where they summarized: a) the information source used, b) their ideas to better support a neurodiverse society, and c) their opinions on aspects of neurodiversity. Several important findings emerged. First, 64% of the sample had never heard of the term neurodiversity; this class was their first exposure to it. Second, students conducting their own searches on neurodiversity had the highest level of optimism ($p < 0.05$) that society was ready to accept neurodiversity. Students identified even higher rates of receptivity (85%) amongst their friends. Third, student ideas to advance neurodiversity were organized into more salient categories for campuses to consider. Our findings challenge neuroscience programs to consider their role in providing “first exposure” opportunities to students in the diversity, equity, and inclusion realm, especially in areas directly related to our field. We also discuss the growing relevance of neurodiversity in research and academia and offer programming possibilities to enhance neurodiversity awareness and support on college campuses.

Key words: neurodevelopment; neurodiversity; neurodivergent; neurotypical; autism; ADHD; universal design for learning; TED talks; information literacy; student accessibility services

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As educators of neuroscience, we seek to introduce our students to the vast excitement and potential offered by our field. We create interesting lectures, white-board drawings, demonstrations, and use a wide variety of proven teaching strategies. JUNE is full of such examples. We emphasize principles of universal design for learning to maximize learning opportunities for a diverse student body. After all, it is we neuroscientists who should understand best the reality that, while we are each human, each one of our brains has developed in response to different genetic, environmental, and experiential influences. In short, there are myriad ways that human brains can be built, for instance through extended mitosis in this brain region or different neuronal migration in that one. Our natural neurological variabilities cause our brains to function differently in many ways. This phenomenon is known as “neurodiversity”.

The idea of neurodiversity gained significant traction in Sinclair’s 1993 essay, “Don’t Mourn For Us,” that challenged parents to look at their children’s’ autism outside of the cure-lens and embrace acceptance (Sinclair, 2012; Pripas-Kapit, 2019). The neurodiversity movement itself encourages the embracing of one’s neurodivergence – that is, mental functioning or brain type that diverges from the norm (c.f., Chapman, 2021) adding a neurological diversity to the diversity paradigm. There is diversity in the minds and brains of people too, just as there is diversity in skin color or gender.

Neurodivergents often fall outside the medical and social norms of ability – that is, those who experience and interact with the world differently, regardless of the presence or lack of a diagnosed “neurotype.” Traditionally, the neurodiversity movement encompassed individuals of certain, underrepresented and misunderstood neurotypes, like autism and ADHD. It was a protest against the unfair treatment and perceptions of these individuals in comparison to their neurotypical counterparts; however, the movement has since expanded to be more inclusive of more neurotypes and human experiences. Due to the ever-changing nature of the movement, it would be wrong to attempt to define the movement as supporting a specific list of neurodivergent experiences, effectively excluding future expansions and points of view that may not be as prevalent today. Neurodiversity is about embracing the diversity of human minds. It is a movement for equality and equity in the perception and treatment of all peoples regardless of their neurotype. It is a movement that promotes inclusion and acceptance, advocating for better accessibility and the protection of disabled rights (Chapman, 2021; Ne’eman and Pellicano, 2022).

The definition of neurodiversity remains a debated topic among researchers, scholars, and activists alike. Who it involves, what it is, and how it applies to topics like the social and medical models of disability is inconsistent depending on the author or advocate. Ne’eman & Pellicano (2022)

described this inconsistency as "akin to a game of telephone" as people pass their own interpretations on to each other, and the definition takes different shapes. If the primary goals of the neurodiversity viewpoint are to promote a) acceptance of those who identify as neurodivergent and b) support for challenges living in an environment not conducive to neurodivergent needs, we must educate our neuroscience undergraduates to be robust future public policy makers who are aware of this important discourse. Although the concept of neurodiversity and its accompanying movement have been around for quite some time, it isn't well known what the perceptions of the undergraduate population, our future policy makers, are.

The aims of this study were to 1) explore student perception of neurodiversity, 2) assess the use of different information sources for the education of neurodiversity, and 3) use the resulting data to inform the teaching, learning, and enhancement of neurodiversity awareness and programming on campuses. We hypothesized students would be unfamiliar with neurodiversity because it is not often addressed in typical coursework. We also hypothesized the type of educational source would impact student beliefs of societal readiness for neurodiversity, with the strongest impact likely to come from an academic source, given its greater degree of credibility.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

All portions of this study were approved by the Western New England University Institutional Review Board. Participants included sophomore/junior level undergraduate students (N=146) enrolled in six different sections of an Introduction to Neuroscience course over three years. This was a sample of convenience, representative of the typical education process, where each participant enrolled in a section of the course that best fit their schedule for that semester. Early in each semester, students were presented with a three-week assignment that required them to explore the topic of neurodiversity using assigned sources that were either popular, academic, a TED talk, or one of their own choosing. Each section was exposed to only one source approach (popular, academic, TED, or their choice). The diversity, equity, and inclusion learning objective met with this assessment was, "Students will be expected to provide an understanding of and rationale for diverse perspectives".

In Phase 1 of the assignment, they read, watched, or found their source. This was followed by Phase 2, a week of reflection on their source and its contents. Phase 3 entailed writing a one-page, single-spaced paper. The paper consisted of three paragraphs where students 1) summarized their source: "In the first paragraph, you will summarize your source. In this paragraph, you will include the main point, evidence used to support the main point, how that evidence was obtained, and opinions/tone of the source"; 2) listed and described three ideas that could move neurodiversity forward: "In the second paragraph, you will identify three ideas that could advance the neurodiversity movement. It is not necessary that you agree with neurodiversity. As a member of our society, you have experiences that may be useful in improving the way diversity is approached, discussed, and implemented. You should address three such ideas, order them in importance [most important is first, least important is third], and explain them in enough detail for others to understand. Be clear about the outcome you would expect if each of your three ideas was implemented";, and 3) gave their opinion whether they had heard of neurodiversity before, how ready society was to accept neurodiversity, and a friend's response to the idea of neurodiversity: "In the third paragraph, provide your opinion of your source, whether or not you have heard of neurodiversity before [if so, when and how?] and, in your view, on a scale of 1 [not ready at all] to 10 [definitely ready!], how ready is society to accept the concept of neurodiversity? Briefly describe a friend's response to the idea of neurodiversity. Be specific in their response."; see Figure 1.

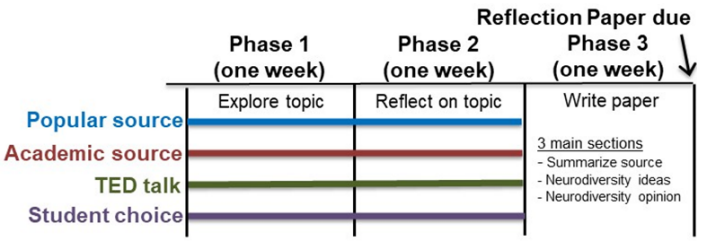

Figure 1. Summary of the three-week project. Popular source (www.disabled-world.com/disability/awareness/neurodiversity/), Academic source Baron-Cohen (2017), TED talk (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qvvrme5WIwA), or their own source.

Data collection began after the completion of the semester. Student names were then coded to maintain confidentiality of responses. Since students were proficient at summarizing their source, our data collection focused primarily on the second and third sections of their papers. Trained evaluators, blind to participant identity, quantified whether the student had heard of neurodiversity before, their previous exposure to neurodiversity, and their friend's view of neurodiversity (positive, neutral, or negative response).

We also assessed whether certain types of sources (popular, academic, TED talk, or their choice) would be more influential to students in their perception of openness to receive new information, in this case, neurodiversity. A one-way (TYPE OF SOURCE) ANOVA (SPSS, version 29) was used to investigate whether any differences could be detected in student perceptions of societal readiness for neurodiversity on a scale of 1 (not ready at all) to 10 (definitely ready). Posthoc analyses using LSD were conducted. A nominal p value of 0.05 was considered statistically significant for all statistical tests.

Student ideas to move neurodiversity forward were captured verbatim and organized in Excel. Ideas that were similar were placed together. This allowed us to categorize responses based on frequency (similar ideas were placed together) while still remaining sensitive to the possibility of creative answers (unique responses). GraphPad Prism (version 10) was used to generate all graphs in this study.

RESULTS

Given that this was a sample of convenience, it was important to establish course sections were similar in

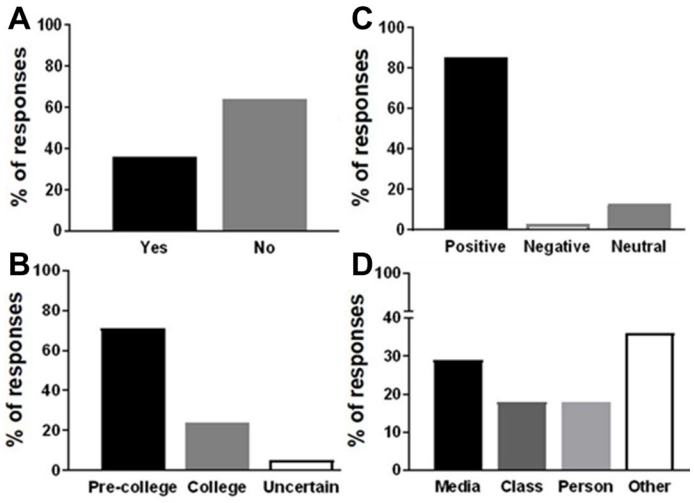

Figure 2. Summary of student responses. *A:* Previous exposure to neurodiversity. *B:* When students first heard about neurodiversity. *C:* Friend response to the idea of neurodiversity. *D:* Where students first heard about neurodiversity.

several important areas. Prior to evaluating student data, we verified that each course section was similar in academic composition. This included final course grades (standard 4.0 point system), attendance (a measure of general course engagement), and major (primarily psychology, neuroscience, and biology students).

Student Familiarity with Neurodiversity

In our sample of 146 students, 64.4% of them had never heard of the term neurodiversity before (see Figure 2A). This number was stable over the entirety of our study. Of those who had heard of neurodiversity, most had heard of it before entering college (see Figure 2B); 48% of students identified family members who were neurodivergent or who worked directly with this subpopulation. An additional 15% of students identified themselves as neurodivergent. Nearly 30% received their first exposure through social media (see Figure 2D).

As an extension of this assignment, students were asked to discuss the idea of neurodiversity with a friend to see if they had a positive, neutral, or negative response to neurodiversity. Friends of students who were part of each of the information source groups responded positively to the neurodiversity information provided by participants (positive responses overall averaged 85% and ranged from 78% [popular group] to 92% [academic group]; see Figure 2C).

Student Perceptions of Societal "Readiness" for Neurodiversity Are Influenced by the Type of Information Source

We hypothesized the type of educational source would impact student beliefs of societal readiness for neurodiversity. Of the four groups sampled (popular, academic, TED talk, or their choice) we expected the strongest impact to come from an academic source, given its greater degree of credibility. An analysis of variance showed that the effect of type of information source was indeed significant, $F(3,130)=3.674$, $p=0.014$. The effect

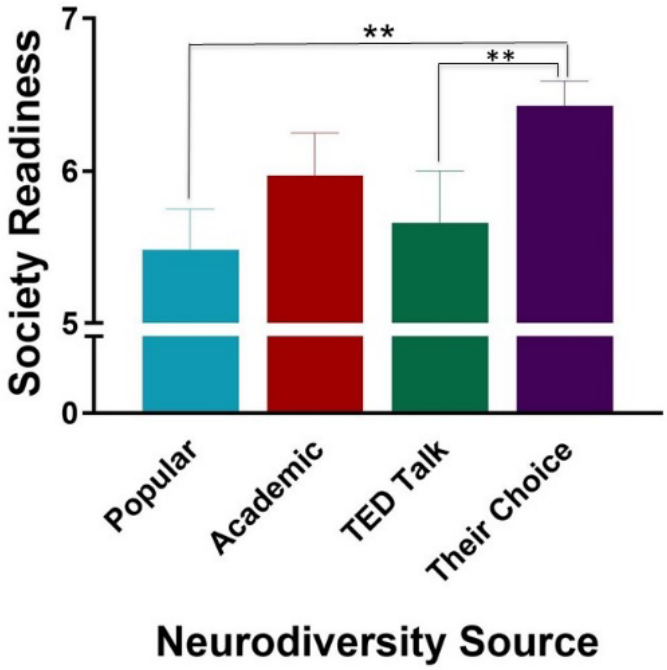

Figure 3. When students were able to choose their own source, they were more positive in their belief that society was ready to embrace neurodiversity (** = $p < 0.05$).

size, calculated as eta squared (η^2), was 0.08, indicating a medium/moderate effect. Post hoc analyses using the LSD post hoc criterion for significance indicated that students in the "their choice" group rated societal readiness significantly higher ($M=6.43$, $SD=1.36$) than students in either the "popular" ($M=5.48$, $SD=1.22$) or "TED talk" ($M=5.66$, $SD=1.60$) groups, $p<0.05$ (see Figure 3).

We surveyed the neurodiversity sources chosen by individual participants from the "their choice" condition and organized them into information literacy categories (peer reviewed, expert opinion, popular/news, and other). The most often chosen category was expert opinion (68%) with Baumer and Frueh (2021) the most used source within that category. Peer reviewed sources were chosen second-most often (17%) followed by "other" (9%) and popular/news sources (6%).

Ideas to Further Neurodiversity

Students were required to provide three ideas that could advance the concept of neurodiversity. The most common ideas centered around six general categories (see Figure 4). 1) Offer educational opportunities (67% of all participants provided an idea in this category) included ideas of teaching neurodiversity through classes, diversity training, and topic presentations. 2) Transform perceptions (54%) included changing how people see neurodiversity, with a focus on neurodivergent strengths and points of view. 3) Promote language/conversations (48%) involved ideas to ban words, encourage positive conversation, and have more widespread conversations around definitions. 4) Secure number and variety of accommodations and supports in place in both the workplace and educational setting. 5) Endorse social-facing initiatives (37%) involved changing

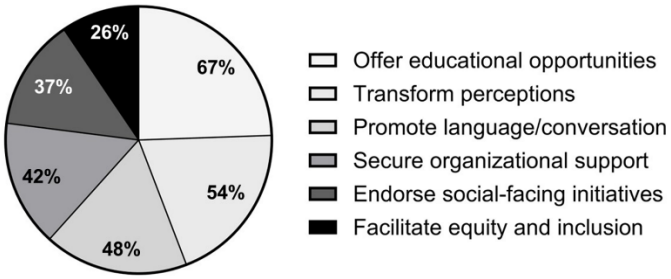

Figure 4. The most frequent ideas listed to advance neurodiversity. Six idea categories to advance neurodiversity were identified. "Offer educational opportunities" was the #1 idea. (Inclusion criterion = >25% of participants in the sample suggested it as one of their three ideas.)

how neurodiversity is regarded by increasing the representation of neurodivergence in movies, promoting neurodiversity by campaign through celebrity endorsement, events, and social media. 6) Facilitate equity and inclusion (26%) included changing how candidates are hired for jobs and teaching why/how jobs should include more diverse candidates. One example of an actionable idea included establishing a community center for neurodivergents to connect and learn helpful skills. This category also included ideas around diversifying the student population and desegregating classrooms.

Despite these many ideas, there was a noticeable amount of misuse of terms related to neurodiversity (neurodivergent, neurotypical, neurodiverse, etc.) as well as a strong focus on autism, suggesting that student understanding of the topic may have remained somewhat limited in scope to the source they were assigned to read. Nonetheless, students contributed a wide and diverse variety of ideas for implementation.

DISCUSSION

We report three main findings from this study. First, our study demonstrated that many undergraduates (64% of the sample) had never heard of the term neurodiversity before, and this project was their first exposure to the topic. Of the subset who had heard of neurodiversity, most had their first exposure before college via social media or personal experience. Second, students who chose their own source to inform them of neurodiversity ("their choice") had the most optimistic view that society was ready to embrace the neurodiversity movement. Third, while students offered many ideas to support the neurodiversity movement, the top idea was to offer educational opportunities.

Many of our students had not been exposed to neurodiversity before. We hypothesized that students would be unfamiliar with the concept of neurodiversity, and this hypothesis was supported. Our data can be considered in light of several related observations. First, over the course of our study, the number of published works on the topic of neurodiversity grew exponentially from 200 articles in 2021 (search of the term "neurodiversity" on PubMed) to almost 500 results in early 2024. Second, Google Trends data indicates a rising number of neurodiversity-related searches on their search engine, with the highest volume of searches occurring in March, 2023. In the past year, "neurodiversity week 2023" was considered a breakout search, growing over 500% in popularity (Neurodiversity). In the past three months, "neurodivergency" and "Stanford neurodiversity summit 2023" have been breakout searches too (Stanford Medicine, 2024). This number of published articles and searches on a popular search engine indicate a growing interest and relevance of neurodiversity, especially in recent years, among researchers and the general public alike. Despite these factors, we did not detect any significant increase in student exposure to neurodiversity across our three-year sample.

We also hypothesized that the type of educational source would impact student beliefs of societal readiness for neurodiversity, with the strongest impact likely to come from an academic source. This hypothesis was not supported. Instead, and interestingly, students who were required to find information from their own sources on neurodiversity had significantly more optimism that society was ready to accept the concept of neurodiversity compared to those students who were assigned popular or TED talk sources. Our data showed students were much more likely to find and use expert opinion sources. Interestingly, the most frequent expert opinion source used by students was the first option displayed by Google with the query, "what is neurodiversity?" This suggests the possibility that self-guided information literacy may be a powerful mediator of acceptance of a targeted social justice construct, in this case neurodiversity, especially when finding an expert opinion source, and possibly when that search yields a fast answer. There are a number of other parameters important to consider if additional phases of this study were to be conducted, including tracking the number of sources students perused prior to their final source selection and whether those sources were supportive or critical of neurodiversity.

Notably, students in all conditions reported their friends to be highly supportive of the concept of neurodiversity. The type of source did not seem to be as important as the possibility that peer (student)-informed communication influenced their friends' opinion. While our data suggest friend responses were positive because of informed communication, it is possible that their friends already had a positive view of neurodiversity. Additional data should be collected in this area to better determine whether source credibility (defined by information literacy) or source communicator, or even an interplay between the two, is the more powerful persuasion tool when the goal is to inform a future policy maker.

The Growing Relevance of Neurodiversity in Research and Academia

In reality, there are models for how society could successfully embrace and utilize neurodiversity. "Nothing about us without us" is a major slogan of multiple disabled and neurodivergent groups, and it has progressed into academia. For instance, autoethnography is a way for neurodivergent researchers to contribute their own experiences to guide research direction, procedure, and interpretation. This has the potential to increase progress

towards improved neurotypical and neurodivergent relations, communication, and collaboration. One challenge though is that academia tends to focus on deficit models, and many neurodivergents find related research fields to be inhospitable and exclusionary. Those considered greater authorities on the topic of disabilities under neurodivergence are often not neurodivergents themselves (Rosqvist et al., 2023; Botha, 2021). This doesn't stop neurodivergents from involving themselves though, as even this article includes authorship of a neurodivergent student.

Manalili et al. (2023) suggested one reason why neurodiversity hasn't been a focus of the cognitive sciences is because it diverges from the neurotypical normative, only interesting researchers under the presumption that neurodivergent groups are abnormal and impaired, even though the idea of neurodiversity involves the application of how the mind works. They further argue that not taking neurodiversity seriously is unethical and grounded in eugenic ideals where past and current research demean neurodivergent groups, dehumanizing and treating them as objects to study; additionally, such studies are often used as justification for the harm done to neurodivergent peoples trying to convert and "cure" them (Manalili et al., 2023). Others have suggested a list of recommendations for researchers to take when researching neurodivergent groups. This list includes recommendations to balance the research of weaknesses/challenges with a focus on strengths; environmental and social contexts for both what is disabling and promotes thriving; and discrimination and stigma and how they shape development. It also calls researchers to consider their results from multiple perspectives to avoid making one-sided assumptions that don't encompass neurodivergent experience (Dwyer, 2022). These suggestions have the potential to shift how science can benefit from diversity of perspective.

Recent research has suggested benefits to innovation when having groups of neurodiverse minds work together. In one study, participants were asked to build towers from spaghetti noodles after they watched another participant build theirs. Dissimilarity in tower building was used as a measure of creativity. Three groups of participants were created that were autistic, non-autistic, or a combination of each. The study found that the most neurodiverse group had more creative tower-building than groups who had only autistic or non-autistic participants. In other words, groups of participants who were similar to each other had greater levels of imitation and emulation (Axbey et al., 2023). Businesses making changes to embrace neurodiversity have also seen the benefits of greater diversity in the workplace: diverse individuals bring diverse skill sets and perspectives to the table, increasing the amount of additional talents that might not have been found in a setting lacking diversity. Accommodating these diverse individuals also has benefited the workplace, improving communication and productivity across the board (Loiacono and Ren, 2018).

Neurodiversity on Campuses

Critical views of neurodiversity exist (c.f., Russell, 2020), and neurodivergent challenges are often perceived of as impairments due to a social model of disability that categorizes neurodivergents as disabled (c.f., den Houting, 2019). Findings from our study included student-generated ideas that could advance the neurodiversity movement to create a more open environment for progress to be made in this arena. Each student was challenged to identify three ideas, whether or not they agreed with the concept of neurodiversity because, as members of our society, their experiences may be useful in improving the way diversity is approached, discussed, and implemented. From this challenge, six actionable themes emerged with "offering educational opportunities" as the top theme. This makes sense from a bias perspective; lack of familiarity reinforces stigmas.

We presented these student-generated ideas at the Society for Neuroscience meeting in 2023 (Theme J: History, Education, and Society). When we returned, we met with administrative leaders on our own campus. The student-generated ideas provided the starting point for this conversation. We discussed a range of opportunities and barriers that had to be considered to make a culture shift on campus. This was an important first step to facilitate new campus initiatives and support structures around a collaborative involving neurodivergent students, faculty, and key student support services stakeholders. The impact of this process is future programming that aspires to enhance neurodiversity awareness, support, and services on college campuses.

Should such an initiative start in neuroscience programs, since it is highly relevant to the field and also fits squarely in the realm of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)? Should there be an expectation that neuroscience programs play a role in ensuring they provide "first exposure" opportunities to students in such DEI realms? While the answer to these questions are complicated when considering the many learning objectives neuroscience programs must meet, JUNE plays an important role in providing thought-provoking possibilities to undergraduate neuroscience educators. Recent examples have been published in JUNE that highlight diversity in the field of neuroscience (Schreiber and Robinson-Drummer, 2022) and in neuroscientist profiles from historically underrepresented or marginalized groups (c.f., Frenzel et al., 2022). These resources could be important starting points for neuroscience programs to consider, with targeted faculty development to create, carry out, and assess DEI assignments and course objectives an important part of the process.

Beyond individual programs, many schools of higher education have already become involved in neurodiversity. Schools like Stanford Medicine (2024), UC Berkeley (2024) Syracuse University (Center on Disability and Inclusion, 2024), and Drexel University have started implementing neurodiversity initiatives to promote research, accessibility, and community on their campuses. Articles and blogs about neurodiversity have been published by Harvard (Austin and Pisano, 2017; Baumer and Frueh, 2021) and Colorado State University (Nishi, 2023). Florida State University offers a Professional Certification in The Fundamentals of Neurodiversity for Multidisciplinary Professionals aimed to help professionals and policymakers understand

neurodiversity and learn approaches to support neurodivergents (Florida State University, 2024). These examples represent only a subset of the many campuses working towards creating support around a more neurodiverse student population.

Those campuses still in the early stages of developing strategies to support their neurodivergent students will find the recommendations in Dwyer et al., 2023 particularly helpful. These recommendations read like a "best practices" list: "recognize neurodiversity as a DEI issue; provide campus-wide universal design and neurodiversity training; establish Disability Cultural Centers; ensure neurodivergent people are meaningfully involved as leaders in neurodiversity initiatives; integrate disability accommodations to enhance accessibility; increase flexibility of disability documentation requirements; recognize and accommodate sensory discomfort, distraction, distress, and overload; establish supports to ensure a smooth transition into and out of postsecondary education; improve mental health supports for neurodivergent students; establish mechanisms to swiftly provide remediation if neurodivergent people are prevented from receiving accommodations; respect neurodivergent people's preferences regarding advocates and support people; offer flexibility of modalities to accessibility of communication and instruction". In conclusion, neuroscience educators are uniquely positioned to provide students with first exposure to significant DEI movements that, in turn, can lead to opportunities to make powerful changes to our campuses and in our communities.

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