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Diverse, equitable, and inclusive spaces in post-secondary institutions – A Reaching Diversity substructure developed to aid institutions in redesigning their environments to better accommodate and support neurodivergent students.

Imagine, feeling so isolated, and different from your peers that you truly believe yourself to be from another planet. And everyday you wake up questioning, “what is wrong with me?”, “why am I so different?”. This experience, while inconceivable to the many, is a common experience for those that live with neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder), ASD (autism spectrum disorder), Tic Disorder, ID (Intellectual Disabilities), and more. In today's age these neurological variations are being categorized under an umbrella term known as neurodivergent. And while this term, is inclusive, and has opened the door for many neurodivergent individuals, allowing them to be confident in who they are; the neurodivergent movement still has a ways to go before it is recognized as a being a normal variation in the human population. This then begs the question, how can we, as a communities innovate change for neurodiversity? Well, when looking to innovate, one must always look towards youth. In order to begin reaching diversity in our communities, we must first transform the spaces that the younger generations occupy. This of course means reflecting on places of education as they are place for enacting change. For this paper, primarily places of higher education will be discussed and reviewed. This is due to the generational increase of neurodivergent youth between the ages of 18-34 that are in the proper age

bracket to attend post-secondary institutions¹. Noting this increase of neurodivergent youth entering the world of academia, it is clear that the need for more inclusive and equitable accommodations is required. In 2016, Statistics Canada conducted a study begging the question “Are Mental Health and Neurodevelopmental Conditions Barriers to Postsecondary Access?” The results deemed that “Youth diagnosed with health conditions, may face barriers to attending PSE (Postsecondary Education) that are distinct from those challenging the general population of youth”². The barriers and challenges that are understood to be plaguing the neurodivergent people are unique to the community as well to each neurodivergent person. And while adjusting institutions environments to accommodate neurodiverse minds may be an overwhelming idea, carefully considered substructures that breakdown institutions equitable downfalls, can help progress post-secondary institutions to being better inclusive environments for neurodiverse people. It is here that I suggest, any university, and or student wishing to improve their institutions inclusion of neurodiversity, use the following Reaching Diversity substructure that I created in order to reform their institutions current environment. The Reaching Diversity substructure focuses on neurodiversity as a whole, it is to be noted however, that ASD heavily influenced many recommended accommodation in the substructure’s module 2. The reason being that the diagnostic criteria for ASD in the DSM-5 has an overwhelming number of overlapping symptoms with other neurodevelopmental disorders, and therefore, encompasses a large portion of symptoms that can be supported³. By supporting the overlapping symptoms described in DSM-5, the barriers faced by

¹ Stacey D Espinet et al., “A Review of Canadian Diagnosed ADHD Prevalence and Incidence Estimates Published in the Past Decade,” Brain sciences (U.S. National Library of Medicine, August 8, 2022), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9406225/#B12-brainsci-12-01051>.

² Rubab Arim and Marc Frenette, “Are Mental Health and Neurodevelopmental Conditions Barriers to Post-Secondary Access?,” Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series: Statistics Canada, February 19, 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2019005-eng.htm>.

³ American Psychiatric Association, “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,” 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425787>.

other neurodiverse individuals needs should be met; any symptoms that are unique to other specific neurodevelopmental disorders has room to addressed specifically in module 2. Furthermore, this paper is designed to communicate the Reaching Diversity substructure in an accessible way. This is done by breaking down each of the 4 modules conceptually then factually in order to provide neurodivergent minds with multiple ways to consume the information presented. To begin, the substructures first module, “Diversity’s Relation to the Institution; Analyzing the Environment” guides readers through the process of reviewing their institutions current environment for DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) of neurodivergent minds. It is here that the lack of supports and accommodations comes through. These gaps are reviewed and then brought down to module 2 for “Redesign”. Module 2 is where the gaps are filled, and other beneficial supports are recommended. The end of module 2 is where student recommended supports come in; it is here that any other special neurodivergent supports can be acknowledged and added to the substructure. The third module focuses on “Education”, here, educational points are suggested for faculty, and students. Collaboration from neurodivergent students is also included in this segment as it is vital that the neurodiverse student body have input as to what they wish to be taught about their neurological variances. In conclusion is the fourth module, “Review” this module includes two segments, the first being a series of questions to ensure that all gaps in DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) for neurodivergent students at the institution have been met and accommodated. The second portion consists of an I-E-O model (input-environment-outcome); this model focuses on the relation between the Reaching Diversity substructure implementation into its environment, and the students’ outcomes from said implementation. This substructure was chosen as it determines the most effective part of the substructure as well as its downfalls, thus allowing for changes to easily be recognized and made throughout the future.

As discussed, the first module presented is Diversity's Relation to the Institution: Analysing the Environment.

Reaching Diversity Substructure

Module 1: Diversity's Relation to the Institution; Analyzing the Environment

- 1.A. What supports/ accommodations are currently in place for neurodivergent students?
 - 1.A.1. What is the intersectionality with the institution and neurodiversity?
 - 1.A.2. Are these supports accessible to neurodiverse students?
 - 1.A.3. If no, are there supports/ accommodations in place for undiagnosed students and or students who have been denied accommodations?⁴
- 1.B. How is diversity included in the institution? ⁵
- 1.C. How is diversity viewed at the institution?
- 1.D. Is the institution educating the student body and faculty about neurodiversity?
 - 1.D.1. If so, how?
- 1.E. Are there neurodiverse safe spaces at the institution?
 - 1.E.1. If so, are they accessible?
- 1.F. Are classrooms neurodiverse psychological safe spaces?⁶

⁴ Dena Evans et al., "Autism Spectrum Disorder: Reconceptualising Support for Neurodiverse Students in Higher Education," *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 2023, pp. 1-15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080x.2023.2180168>.

⁵ Dena Evans et al., "Autism Spectrum Disorder:"1-15.

⁶ Cliff Weitzman, "5 Best Ways to Support Neurodiversity in the Classroom," Speechify, December 5, 2022, https://speechify.com/blog/neurodiversity-classroom/?landing_url=https%3A%2F%2Fspeechify.com%2Fblog%2Fneurodiversity-classroom%2F.

1.F.1. Are there optional ways for neurodiverse students to consume information?⁷

1.F.2. Are teachers educated on neurodiverse behaviours?⁸

1.G. What are students' opinions on the current supports offered by the institution?⁹.

Module 1's primary initiative is to understand current supports in place at post-secondary institutions, neurodiversity's connection to the student body, faculty, and administration, as well as to determine if the environment of the post-secondary institution promotes a psychologically safe space for neurodivergent people or not. This is done by asking questions such as 1.A.1, "What is the intersectionality with the institution and neurodiversity?"¹⁰. By asking questions such as these, the connections that people have with neurodiversity can be better understood, as the terminals of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and other social issues can affect how others treat neurodivergent people or how they have or have not been educated on such topics¹¹. As a result, 1.A.2. and 1.A.3. can be better answered and understood. This is due to the intersectional barriers being broken down between people's inequalities and neurodiversity, which then allows the relation between the two to be seen. Take for example, the issues of accessibility and diagnosis; until recently, studies of phenotypes of ASD have been done in relation to the male gender, leaving the female gender to be either misdiagnosed or their issues and needs being neglected¹². By understanding intersectional issues such as diagnosis and gender inaccessibility, questions 1.A.2 and 1.A.3. become better understood, thus making them prominent issues that must be addressed

⁷ Cliff Weitzman, "5 Best Ways," 2022

⁸ Cliff Weitzman, "5 Best Ways," 2022

⁹ Cliff Weitzman, "5 Best Ways," 2022

¹⁰ Patrick Dwyer et al., "Building Neurodiversity-Inclusive Postsecondary Campuses: Recommendations for Leaders in Higher Education," *Autism in Adulthood*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2021.0042>.

¹¹ Patrick Dwyer et al., "Building Neurodiversity," 2022

¹² Dena Evans et al., "Autism Spectrum Disorder," 2023

in order to redesign post-secondary institutions to be DEI spaces. Additionally, by understanding the institutions intersectionality with neurodivergence, it becomes easier to answer questions such as 1.B., 1.C. and 1.F. in meaningful ways. It is vital, that hard judgement be used when reviewing the institutions and answering these questions, as it severely impacts neurodivergent people to be a part of neurotypical spaces that do not create room for their needs¹³. By not having inclusive space for neurodivergent people, many are socially ostracised and or are bullied, which takes strong emotional tolls that is shown to increase depression, anxiety, and suicide in the neurodivergent population¹⁴. In order to combat these outcomes, and to create a more inclusive environment, questions such as 1.D., 1.E., 1.F., 1.F.2., and 1.G. can be reviewed and then addressed in the following module, “Redesign”.

Module 2: Redesign

Supports deemed proficient in module 1 will be tasked under 2.A. and left in place. In section 2.B recommended supports are to be cross checked with current supports, any supports not met or that are not proficient enough will be redesigned in 2.B.

- 2.A. List proficient supports from module 1,
- 2.B. Recommended supports (Cross check with current available supports,
 - 2.B.1. I.E.P. (Individualized Learning Plans),
 - 2.B.2. Exam accommodations,
 - 2.B.3. Assistive technologies,
 - 2.B.3.1. Text-to-speech/ speech-to-text

¹³ The Different Minds Podcast, *The Different Minds Podcast*, 2021.

¹⁴ Kerstin Winberg, Hanna Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, and David Rosenberg, “Inclusive Spaces in Post-Secondary Education – Exploring the Experience of Educational Supports for People with a Neuropsychiatric Disability,” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 23, no. 12 (July 2018): pp. 1263-1276, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1445303>.

- 2.B.3.2. Noise cancelling and or dampening devices,
- 2.B.3.3. Mind Mapping software,
- 2.B.3.4. Live caption and note taking devices,
- 2.B.3.5. transcription software
- 2.B.3.6. Productivity/ prioritizing software (e.g., Ayoya, isolator)¹⁵,
- 2.B.3.7. Performance assistance software (e.g., wordQ software helps predict text)¹⁶, and
- 2.B.3.8. Literary technology (e.g., WizCom Pen helps with tough words and vocabulary, learning ally helps with reading difficulties)¹⁷.
- 2.C. Alternative format textbooks,
- 2.D. Accessible funding,
- 2.E. Educational assistant,
- 2.F. Academic strategist,
- 2.G. Tutors,
- 2.H. Note Takers,
- 2.I. Body double (Person to work along side with to get work done, not there to help do work),
- 2.J. Into and out of post-secondary transition programs¹⁸,

¹⁵ April Slocombe, “What Is Assistive Technology?” *Exceptional Individuals*, July 27, 2022, <https://exceptionalindividuals.com/about-us/blog/what-is-assistive-technology/>

¹⁶ April Slocombe, “What Is Assistive Technology?,” July, 27·2022.

¹⁷ April Slocombe, “What Is Assistive Technology?,” July, 27·2022.

¹⁸ Patrick Dwyer et al., “Building Neurodiversity-Inclusive Postsecondary Campuses: Recommendations for Leaders in Higher Education,” *Autism in Adulthood*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2021.0042>.

- 2.J.1 Provided summer transition programs 4-6 weeks before school begins that shows students their specific classrooms, and other vital institution locations as well as community locations.
- 2.J.2 Coexists with mentorship programs that other neurodiverse individuals in the community and or institution participate in order to mentor new students,
- 2.J.3. Transition out program provides students with unwritten expectations of graduate school and employment¹⁹,
 - 2.J.3.1. offers career supports that addresses challenges neurodivergent people face, while partnering with external agencies and programs if necessary to expand institutional capacities²⁰,
 - 2.J.3.2. Partner with employers to develop customized job opportunities and programs for neurodivergent individuals²¹, and
 - 2.J.3.3. Ensure career supports aim to support neurodivergent individual own long-term and or short-term career goals²².
- 2.K. Neurodiversity safe spaces,
 - 2.K.1. Sensory refuge spaces (e.g., rooms that are dimmable, quiet, easy access, comfortable with a variety of seating, calming)

¹⁹ Patrick Dwyer et al., “Building Neurodiversity,” 2022

²⁰ Patrick Dwyer et al., “Building Neurodiversity,” 2022

²¹ Patrick Dwyer et al., “Building Neurodiversity,” 2022,

²² Patrick Dwyer et al., “Building Neurodiversity,” 2022

2.K.2. Disability cultural center/ club space (disability have a different primary mission and purpose than disability offices that focus on legal accommodations)²³, and

2.L. Single Person Contact for neurodiverse students

2.M. Ask neurodiverse students what other accommodations they would like to see and how said accommodations would benefit them (this should be asked in an accessible way that allows quick and easy response, e.g., a short questionnaire, a drobox in the hallway, and or via social media.)

The Redesign module focuses on support the needs of neurodivergent individuals by suggesting specific accommodations that studies show are beneficial additions to aiding in the lives of neurodivergent people. The purpose of accommodations is to reform post-secondary environments into equitable spaces for those who are faced with different challenges than the general student body²⁴. By enacting inclusive accommodations, the intersectional issues found in institutions can be counteracted, thus providing a better quality of life for neurodivergent people. This is shown to be true through accommodations such as assistive technology. Many studies and personal experiences from neurodivergent students explain that assistive technologies have significantly reduced their anxiety levels in and out of their classrooms²⁵. Assistive technologies, such as speech-to-text. which allows for neurodivergent people with auditory processing issues to proficiently participate in discussions and active listening²⁶. This is due to the common struggle of auditory

²³ Patrick Dwyer et al., “Building Neurodiversity,” 2022

²⁴ Dena Evans et al., “Autism Spectrum Disorder,” 2023

²⁵ Dena Evans et al., “Autism Spectrum Disorder,” 2023

²⁶ Patrick Dwyer et al., “Building Neurodiversity,” 2022

processing that many neurodivergent people have to struggle with²⁷. Auditory processing issues make it difficult for the brain to process spoken words, thus rendering conversation and spoken word instructions to be very difficult and frustrating experiences for many neurodivergent individuals²⁸. Additionally other accommodations, such as neurodiversity safe spaces aid in accommodating the struggles faced by neurodivergent individuals. One personal recount, that a fellow neurodivergent peer expressed to me was the overwhelming sensory input experienced at post-secondary, “From smells, noise, to sight, the school is consistently overwhelming”. This experience is common for many neurodivergent individuals, and causes an array of issues, such as the fear of being judged by peers or faculty for stimming in class when the environment becomes to overwhelming²⁹. However, these issues can be overcome by implementing supports such as neurodivergent safe spaces around the school and focusing attention to education about neurodivergent behaviour, as a means of combating stigma and judgment³⁰.

Module 3: Education

3.A. Provide campus wide neurodiversity and universal design training to faculty, staff, and students,

3.A.1. Prioritize education on neurodivergent behaviours and traits,

3.A.2. Educate faculty on how to provide their information in a variety of consumable ways,

3.A.3. Educate faculty on body language (e.g., fidgeting does not mean inattention), and

²⁷ April Slocombe, “What Is Assistive Technology?,” *Exceptional Individuals*, July 27, 2022, <https://exceptionalindividuals.com/about-us/blog/what-is-assistive-technology/>.

²⁸ April Slocombe, “What Is Assistive Technology?,” July 27, 2022,.

²⁹ Dena Evans et al., “Autism Spectrum Disorder,” 2023

³⁰ Patrick Dwyer et al., “Building Neurodiversity,” 2022

3.A.4. Educate faculty on how to devise clear and consistent syllabus that allow neurodivergent minds to easily understand given information.

3.B. Ask neurodiverse students what they wish to have faculty, students, and community educated on.

Module 3's focus on education is designed to reduce stigma towards neurodiversity, among the student body as well as the institutions faculty³¹. The training is designed to foster inclusive attitudes which in turn, leads to a more accepting and understanding academic environment³². This section is especially important as many neurodivergent people have reported in various studies, that they are less likely to disclose their diagnosis/ self-diagnosis to faculty and or peers due to their environments lack of knowledge about neurodivergence³³. Many neurodivergent students have expressed that students and faculty's perception as well as understanding of neurodivergence has lead to them being stereotyped, judged, bullied, and overall being treated differently than before disclosing their diagnosis³⁴. From personal experience as a neurodiverse individual, I can speak to being stereotyped, and bullied due to my diagnosis; this is due to the lack of knowledge and understanding that the general population has about neurodivergence. As a result of this lack of knowledge, my education during my adolescents suffered as not one teacher knew how to address and teach a neurodiverse mind. In turn, I was bullied and ridiculed for being "dumb" when in fact, I just learned information differently than my fellow peers. Nonetheless, that gap in knowledge and understanding of neurodiversity had detrimental emotional impacts on me that to this day, I still have to live with. It is for that reason, that module 3 exists in my reaching diversity substructure.

³¹ Patrick Dwyer et al., "Building Neurodiversity," 2022

³² Dena Evans et al., "Autism Spectrum Disorder," 2023

³³ Dena Evans et al., "Autism Spectrum Disorder," 2023

³⁴ Dena Evans et al., "Autism Spectrum Disorder," 2023

It is in place to prevent others from having to exist in an environment that does not understand or value their neurological variances. Therefore, I believe by educating the environment, about the accommodation and support needs of neurodivergent people the differences we face can begin to be considered with compassion and humility, thus aiding in the goal to have post-secondary environments be equitable space for all.

Though in order to continue to promote a neurodivergent space focused on DEI, consistent revisions of the Reaching Diversity substructure must be made after the substructure's implementation into the post-secondary environment. Hence why I suggest using module 4 as a recurring review system for the substructure.

Module 4: Review and I-E-O

- 4.A. Has data been collected determining what challenges are faced by neurodivergent students?
- 4.B. Have effective and accessible strategies been determined and discussed openly with staff and students both neurodivergent and neurotypical?³⁵
- 4.C. Have effective strategies been designed to better represented and include neurodivergent students?³⁶
- 4.D. Have training programs been created and openly discussed with students and staff both neurodivergent and neurotypical?³⁷
- 4.E. Has there been any implementation of new accommodations, supports, and or education programs?³⁸

³⁵ Patrick Dwyer et al., "Building Neurodiversity," 2022

³⁶ Patrick Dwyer et al., "Building Neurodiversity," 2022

³⁷ Patrick Dwyer et al., "Building Neurodiversity," 2022

³⁸ Patrick Dwyer et al., "Building Neurodiversity," 2022

- 4.F. If so, have mechanisms such as remedial training, disciplinary processes been placed to ensure that the programs are working effectively to address discriminatory behaviour towards neurodivergent people³⁹

Module 4.2.: I-E-O – Input – environment – outcome

The IEO impact model provides a conceptual framework that grounds supports in multi-institutional studies⁴⁰. This model is designed to gather students' experiences prior to entering post-secondary and to gather data about their experiences during post-secondary⁴¹. The model was chosen to be a part of module 4 as it is designed to account for the preintervention of the Reaching Diversity substructure implementation, as well as postintervention. The model also accounts for environmental variables of both participant groups, thus allowing for accurate information to be pulled that will thoroughly assess the substructures effectiveness⁴².

4.2.A. Input Variables⁴³

- i. Demographics: Neurodivergent and Neurotypical participants (Sampling size is up to researcher discretion), individuals' experiences as neurodivergent person with education, social, and mental health (same questionnaire should be given to all participants neurotypical and neurodivergent)
- ii. Quasi-pretest measures: Accounts for preintervention and postintervention measures from a supported group (neurodiverse and neurotypical groups)

³⁹ Patrick Dwyer et al., "Building Neurodiversity," 2022

⁴⁰ "Conceptual Model," Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership, accessed April 10, 2023, <https://www.leadershipstudy.net/strong-conceptual-model>.

⁴¹ "Conceptual Model," April 10, 2023

⁴² "Conceptual Model," April 10, 2023

⁴³ "Conceptual Model," April 10, 2023

with Reaching Diversity supports available) and a controlled group (neurodivergent and neurotypical group participants without Reaching Diversity supports). This pretest-protest group allocation is determined by participants rather than random allocation. Participants may request to join supported group during the study. This can be accounted for as a positive variable in the study when determining effectiveness of the Reaching Diversity substructure.

4.2.B. Environmental Variables⁴⁴

- i. Questions for accommodated group: used available accommodations (this can be surveyed out with check points for each available accommodation; student selects only ones they have used. Once selected is used, question asking how accommodation has helped them is requested.
- ii. Questions for both groups': workloads, majors, grades, home life, student-to-student interaction, student-to-faculty interaction (questions can be surveyed out on a 1-5 scale 1 being poor 5 being good)
- iii. Questions for unsupported group: How can your academic experience be easier (this can be written then will be cross checked with 4.2.B.i. responses)

4.2.C. Outcome Measures

- i. Reaching Diversity substructure implementation related outcomes in 1-2 years (Timeline up to researchers' discretion).

⁴⁴ "Conceptual Model," April 10, 2023

- ii. 4.2.B.i. responses should be cross checked with 4.2.B.iii. in order to determine which accommodations are the most successful and widely required by student body as a whole.
- iii. The 4.2.A.i. questionnaires should be sent again (with minor changes in wording to asking about present experiences) near end of study for cross examination, this can then determine the effectiveness of the Reaching Diversity substructure,
- iv. 4.2.B.ii questionnaire should be sent out again with 4.2.A.i. questionnaire in order to cross examine the progress and or decline of each students experience both with and without supports given.

The final module of the Reaching Diversity substructure focuses on review and effectiveness in order to a promote continuous DEI environment for neurodivergent people. This is done in both the modules, review, and I-E-O portion. The first portion of module 4 ensures that a majority of, if not all, gaps in the institution's diversity, equity, and inclusion redesign were accounted for and met. This is then followed by questions that ensure neurodivergent collaboration in the design and implementation of the Reaching Diversity substructure as a way to give voice to marginalized neurodivergent people⁴⁵ Once the review segment is complete and all participants are satisfied with the outcomes, the conceptual model can be used in a year's time after the substructure's implementation.

The conceptual model in second portion of module 4 consists of an input-environment-outcome model that provides a conceptual framework for the effectiveness of the Reaching Diversity substructure that is specific to each post-secondary institution. By using this model researchers can

⁴⁵ Patrick Dwyer et al., "Building Neurodiversity," 2022

determine the preintervention quality of life for neurodivergent students as well as the preintervention environment quality of the institution. Thus, allowing the postintervention quality of life neurodivergent students and institution to be determined⁴⁶. By using this model, it is ensuring that neurodivergent students needs are being consistently met in a diverse, equitable, and inclusive way that promotes both their education and their wellbeing to be paramount.

By implementing the Reaching diversity substructure into post-secondary environments, the barriers and challenges that are unique to the neurodivergent population are contended, thus allowing for more participation from marginalized neurodivergent students. In turn, the stigma, judgment, and misinformation about neurodivergence is lessened as the neurotypical space becomes less dominating. The creation of inclusive spaces allows for people to feel more connected to their communities, as well as to their peers, thus making the educational experience an equitable journey for all.

⁴⁶ Alexander w Astin and Anthony Lising Antonio, "A Conceptual Model for Assessment ," *Assessment for Excellence: The Philosophy and Practice of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, April 23, 23AD, https://doi.org/chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnnibpcajpcgglefindmkaj/https://www.vumc.org/faculty/sites/default/files/Assessment/AstinAlexanderW_2012_Chapter2_AssessmentForExcellen.pdf

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