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Cover Page Footnote

Emily V. Rasch (she/her) is a second-year M.Ed. student in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership's Higher Education program at Southern Methodist University. Her research interests include higher education organizations, community engagement in higher education, and the boundary-spanning roles of colleges and universities.

The Lights Are Too Loud: Neurodivergence in the Student Affairs Profession

Emily V. Rasch

Much of the current scholarly literature on neurodiversity in higher education tends to focus solely on the experiences of neurodiverse students. There is a significant gap in the literature that highlights how neurodiverse professionals survive and thrive in careers in higher education. Utilizing the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) Methodology, this paper aims to address the current literature gap by using the existing research, coupled with the author's personal experiences, to emphasize the unique needs of neurodiverse people on college campuses. The author offers recommendations for stakeholders in higher education to create equitable and accessible spaces for neurodiverse people on campus. By highlighting the unique needs of neurodiverse people in higher education, the paper aims to validate and amplify their experiences in the higher education sphere.

I will never forget the first time I felt sensory overload in class. Suddenly, I felt my chest get tight, and the fluorescent lights seemed too loud. As I ran out of class to find a space to calm down, I realized that there were not any designated spaces for me to decompress without feeling like I was a distraction or a burden to my colleagues. My narrative is one example of how higher education could not accommodate a person because of their neurodiverse¹ characteristics. However, this narrative, in which neurodiverse people cannot always access spaces and places intended for neurotypical people, is commonplace in higher education.

¹Some of the conditions that fall under the umbrella of neurodiversity include Autism and ADHD

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The term “neurodivergence” describes people whose neurology differs from the majority of the population, otherwise known as neurotypical people² (Morgan, 2019). Much of the current literature on the neurodivergent movement in higher education discusses how students on the autism spectrum adapt to the college environment. However, scant scholarly inquiry explores how neurodivergent student affairs professionals use higher education as a space to validate and liberate their experiences in the profession.

There is a significant gap in the literature pertaining to the neurodiversity movement, which is meant to encompass a wider array of conditions beyond autism spectrum disorder (Colclough, 2016; Peña et al., 2016; Boswell, 2020). In this paper, I use the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology to validate and amplify neurodiverse people’s experiences in higher education. Using the SPN format allows me to rely on the existing literature and my own experiences as a neurodiverse person to contribute to scholarly conversations pertaining to the neurodiversity movement. Furthermore, this paper aims to raise awareness of the struggles that neurodiverse people face in accessing higher education, and it empowers student affairs professionals to become better allies for their neurodiverse colleagues. Through this research, I liberate my own experiences as a neurodiverse, bisexual, aspiring scholar in higher education by highlighting the unique needs of neurodiverse people who work in higher education.

Neurodiversity in Higher Education

This section explores the need to understand what neurodiversity is and how neurodiverse people experience a college campus differently than their neurotypical peers. I also highlight the historical implications of the neurodiversity movement. Resulting policies raised awareness of the impact that the neurodiversity movement can have on aspiring student affairs professionals.

The neurodiversity movement attempts to focus “on differences in individual brain function and behavioural traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the population” (Clouder et al 2020, p. 3). I personally choose to use the term “neurodiversity” because it encompasses the variety of conditions that make me who I am and allows me to liberate myself from existing labels placed on

²Those who do not identify as neurodiverse

me by society. The neurodiversity movement is important in higher education because it aims to create more diverse campuses, further validating the unique experiences of differently-abled people across institutions of higher education (Shmulsky et. al, 2021).

Broadly, neurodiverse students experience college campuses differently from their neurotypical peers. Longtin (2014) noted that the “challenges of this heterogeneous population include sensory sensitivities to noisy environments or bright lights, difficulty regulating their attention, and psychological problems such as anxiety and depression” (p. 65). What are mere fluorescent lights in a building for some can cause overstimulation for others. Student affairs professionals can help ease this sense by being empathetic to the unique struggles that their neurodiverse students and colleagues face (Coghill, 2020). Neurodiverse experiences are not exclusive to students, however, as the experiences accompany neurodiverse individuals to the professional world within higher education. Both the perspectives of neurodiverse students and student affairs professionals are valid, and we must consider how we validate those experiences through our work in higher education.

Higher education is an enterprise with an emphasis on neurotypical people, and the existing scholarly literature supports this assumption. Dolmage (2017) argues that institutions of higher education, historically, were meant for the most high-achieving, capable students. Though Dolmage referenced physical limitations, such assumptions equally apply to the neurodiversity movement, as some of the same barriers exist in higher education. Students who are neurodiverse are sometimes referred to as having “invisible disabilities,” because they appear able-bodied (Dalton, 2013). However, using terms like “invisible disabilities” fails to account for the lived experiences that neurodiverse students and student affairs professionals have in higher education, as these so-called “invisible disabilities” still impact neurodiverse people daily.

One of the unique qualities of the student affairs profession is that it fosters growth and empowers students to have a voice, which is a reason many choose to pursue a career in higher education (Taub & McEwen, 2006). I can attest to this because higher education was the place where I felt the most like myself, and where I could blend my passions with my academic endeavors. Burghstaler and Moore (2009) found that student affairs professionals are not always aware of the accommodations needed to assist students and colleagues who

identify as neurodiverse. As such, additional efforts are needed to better address the specific needs of neurodiverse people in the student affairs profession specifically. Trainings or workshops specifically targeted at addressing neurodiversity can expose various groups of people to policies that benefit differently-abled people (Murray, et. al, 2011).

The Americans with Disability Act and its Impact on Neurodiverse People

National policies, such as the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 certainly increased the awareness of what a disability is and how it is defined (Peacock et al., 2015). This section explores the ADA, but also mentions the limitations of the policy as it pertains to neurodiverse people.

The ADA defines a disability as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual,” but fails to explicitly define what those impairments are (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). While the ADA was amended in 2008 to expand its scope, it has failed neurodiverse people, as it has not explicitly outlined who is protected by it, allowing for multiple interpretations of the policy.³ Additionally, policy on paper can often differ from policy in practice, and we see it in the context of higher education. For instance, an institution may have a policy regarding accommodations for students with disabilities, but attitudes toward those accommodations may differ across various types of colleges and universities.

A limitation of the ADA is that it does not guarantee accommodations for those who request them, which means there are more barriers for people with disabilities in higher education. Also, of the accommodations that exist, they do not always sufficiently address each complex issue associated with neurodivergence. Ortiz (2020) noted that “such accommodations fall short of addressing the challenges faced by neurodiverse students because of the complexity of conditions such as autism” (para. 12). Neurodiverse students and student affairs professionals have unique needs that are not always addressed through accommodations⁴. Further complicating the issue is that a

³The neurodiversity movement embraces neurodiverse characteristics as a disability, which is why the ADA is so pertinent when discussing neurodiversity in higher education.

⁴For me, one of these complexities is through my noise sensitivity. It is hard for me to focus on a specific task if I hear too many conversations happening at once, and I often get overstimulated because of it.

reasonable accommodation for a physical disability may look different for someone who is neurodivergent (Kiuahara & Huefner, 2008). I know that for me, it was a personal choice not to get accommodations, because my current and previous institution's process to obtain them is so difficult; I should not have to endure that process to legitimize my experience as a neurodiverse person. While policies like the ADA may serve the needs of the broader disability community, there are limitations to the policy for neurodiverse people. As such, neurotypical higher education stakeholders and student affairs professionals should willingly acknowledge the limitations of the ADA as it pertains to neurodiverse people in their daily work.

Neurodiverse Behaviors in Higher Education

Neurodiverse characteristics can manifest in various ways. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on two core components of neurodiversity, masking and stimming, to emphasize the various behaviors that help neurodiverse people understand not only the higher education sphere, but the world in general.

When I was first open about my diagnosis, some of my colleagues said I did not act in a way that would make them think that I was neurodiverse. What they observed was masking, or the attempt to mimic neurotypical behaviors, fearing that peers and colleagues perceive that person as different due to neurodiverse behaviors (Miller et al., 2021). The energy that masking takes for me as a neurodiverse person is exhausting and it is hard for me to convince people to care about my specific needs if a problem arises. Masking has both short- and long-term impacts that can affect those in higher education. According to Hull et al. (2017), the short-term effects of masking lead to "extreme exhaustion and anxiety," while the long-term effects of masking tend to focus on the "functioning, achievement and quality of life" of the neurodivergent individual (p. 3). Understanding why neurodiverse people mask certain behaviors can help student affairs professionals, as it can increase awareness of the unique struggles our neurodiverse colleagues face, and better accommodate those needs in the future.

Another behavior that neurodiverse people rely on is stimming, a necessary tool to help regulate an emotional response to a situation. Examples of stims include rocking, shaking, or pacing (Kapp et al, 2019). Westbrook (2016) noted that stimming "allows those with Autism the chance to regulate their bodies and express their emotions on their terms" (p.11). Westbrook's ex-

ample is limited because it focuses specifically on autistic people, and does not account for the neurodiversity spectrum. However, it points to the need for neurodiverse people to find ways to self-regulate their emotions in the higher education sphere. Specific spaces for stimming, like designated quiet rooms, may help neurodiverse people calm down in the wake of a meltdown, or provide a safe space to help self-regulate. If we want to promote universities as accepting of all people, then neurodiverse people must have the resources to succeed, both in and out of the classroom.

Stigma, Bias, and Neurotypical Allyship on College Campuses

Stigma and bias, both invisible, albeit powerful forces, confine neurodiverse people into different categories. For the purposes of this paper, I discuss stigma and bias because both concepts allow student affairs professionals to think critically about the forces that influence our perceptions of neurodiversity. This section also explores the benefits of neurotypical allyship and how it benefits neurodiverse people on college campuses.

Perhaps one of the reasons that neurodiverse students and student affairs professionals are reluctant to disclose the neurodiverse characteristic of their identity is due to stigma. As defined by Grinker (2020), “stigma comes from deep structural conditions, such as capitalism, ideologies of individualism and personal responsibility, and the complicated legacies of racism and colonialism, to perpetuate pre-existing ideas about mental illness (p. 56). Confronting stigma involves the conscious awareness that stigma is a result of power dynamics and structures based on ableist policies, which can harm neurodiverse people (Gillespie-Lynch et. al, 2015). I have encountered stigma in my own experience, when I’ve been reluctant to discuss my own struggles with my peers for fear of being identified as different.

Given the nature of student affairs work, there are biases that come about through various programming efforts, which can impact neurodiverse students and student affairs professionals. For example, an event organizer may not consider how certain types of flashing lights, while visually appealing to others, are not necessarily conducive to a neurodivergent person. As student affairs professionals, we should willingly confront our biases daily because of the nature of our work, and the diverse voices we encounter as a result. Seifert and Holman-Harmon (2009) mention that student affairs professionals “need time to think about and honestly assess their biases, how they came to those

biases, and what they are willing to work on to best meet the needs of students” (p.18). Addressing bias in the student affairs profession may involve various trainings or programming efforts that focus on the lived experiences of neurodiverse individuals. Stewart and Collins (2014) note that disability-centered trainings can start in Divisions of Student Affairs but are most effective when implemented in the larger scope of the student affairs profession⁵. If one of our goals as student affairs professionals is to liberate neurodiverse people from the labels placed upon them by neurotypical people or society, we must willingly confront our own biases in our daily work.

Allyship from neurotypical colleagues is critical to ensuring that neurodiverse people feel accepted and validated on campus. While the increased emphasis on diversity on college campuses has had largely positive impacts, we cannot have diversity-related conversations without considering neurodiversity. Forber-Pratt et.al (2019) note that, “allyship is a fundamental responsibility for those who work in positions that directly impact disabled people, given the immense impact their practices and ways of seeing disability can have on an individual” (p. 124). Because student affairs professionals directly work with differently-abled people, they must willingly address the complex struggles of their neurodiverse colleagues and students they work with. If universities want to amplify diverse voices, they must consider the spectrum of diversity, emphasized in the neurodiversity movement, to truly encompass diverse groups of students.

Allyship from the neurotypical community is of heightened importance, as the pressure cannot exclusively fall on neurodiverse students and professionals to advocate for themselves (Baker, 2006). An example from my own experience is when my friend did her own research to attempt to understand my classroom behavior, which showed me that someone else was willing to understand me, rather than think of my neurodiverse characteristics as distracting. Having neurotypical allies to help neurodivergent people can help liberate us from the unspoken social statuses that confine our behaviors. This practice can also positively contribute to neurodiverse students’ sense of belonging on campus, which is beneficial for the larger campus community (Pesonen et. al, 2020). Like other groups of people on campus, neurodiverse people wish to feel accepted, but that cannot happen if our university community is unwilling to address the struggles we encounter on a daily basis.

⁵The authors also discuss more effective diversity-related trainings at student affairs conferences like NASPA and ACPA.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals

Relying both on the literature and my personal experience, I have found four practical recommendations to help student affairs professionals validate and empower the experiences of neurodiverse people: one, validating neurodiverse people on campus; two, visibly celebrating neurodiversity; three, having neurodiversity-related conversations in different spheres on campus; and four, shifting language that pertains to neurodiversity. Each of these recommendations point to specific ways that colleges and universities can better accommodate neurodiverse voices on campus.

Validating Neurodiverse People on Campus

As I have explored throughout this paper, it is vital for the student affairs profession to acknowledge the unique experiences of neurodiverse people on campus. It is my belief that one of the main ways that the student affairs profession can validate neurodiverse people is by helping us acknowledge that piece of our identity. Kuder et al (2021) mention that university stakeholders “are in a unique position to advocate for a paradigm shift to include neurodiversity in diversity initiatives leading to social transformation” (Location 410). If we validate neurodiverse people through diversity initiatives, we acknowledge that the neurodiverse aspect of their identity is accepted and embraced in spaces in higher education. By validating neurodiverse students and colleagues, we can use our profession to positively impact students and teach them lessons that they may not have learned in a classroom (Reynolds et al., 2009).

Visibly Celebrating Neurodiversity

More campus-wide events should celebrate neurodiversity. Robertson and Ne’eman (2008) note that “a neurodiversity-focused expansion of these diversity events would integrate activities focused on embracing the diversity of autistic people and other neurodiverse population groups” (para. 19). A rallying cry among neurodiverse people is that we want to feel like our experience is validated, and that we matter (Frost et. al, 2019). If college campuses are willing to celebrate, rather than exclude, neurodiverse people, we can feel like our experiences are validated on campus and empower our neurotypical colleagues to do the same.

Having Neurodiversity-Related Conversations in Different Spheres on Campus

This recommendation is likely more applicable to the campus at large, as student affairs professionals rarely cross into the academic sphere. However, if students have conversations about neurodiversity from multiple sources, they may implement it into other facets of their collegiate experiences. Fabri et. al. (2020) say that, “there is a need for universities to provide joined up academic and social support and to implement reasonable adjustments in an inclusive way, thereby avoid stigmatising the student” (p. 1). By working as a collective university, both academic and student affairs can actively work to liberate neurodiverse students from the social and political barriers they may encounter.

Furthermore, graduate students should have conversations related to neurodiversity in their respective higher education graduate programs. Burchell (2021) asserts that if the student affairs “field is not sufficiently prepared to address disability-related topics in graduate school, there is more likelihood professionals will present outdated models of thinking or language unintentionally (p. 191). An increased emphasis on neurodiversity in graduate programs would allow my peers to understand my perspective as a neurodiverse person, but also make them more empathetic to the struggles I face because I am neurodiverse. Too often, I have been told that my self-regulating behaviors are distracting, but my neurotypical peers may not understand that they are necessary to keep me grounded in the classroom environment. Graduate programs should actively engage in conversations about neurodiversity to develop socially conscious studentaffairs professionals who can advocate for their neurodiverse colleagues.

Shifting Language That Pertains to Neurodiversity

Focusing on campus climates is one step to change the conversation on neurodiversity on campus, but shifts must occur in the language used to convey said messages. Hutcheon and Wollbring (2008) say that “the language of policy which addresses the needs of the abilitydiverse population should be changed to reflect nonableist and inclusive sentiments” (p. 10). Language, like disability, is a socially constructed idea that has changed with time, and is a powerful tool to promote inclusivity in the student affairs profession and on college campuses at large. Failing to change the way universities perpetuate existing stigma and power dynamics through language can negatively impact

neurodiverse people in higher education. If we change the way that we discuss neurodiverse people on campus, we can validate neurodiverse experiences within the student affairs profession. Furthermore, this type of change can send messages of inclusivity to stakeholders on campus and help de-stigmatize neurodiversity-related conditions at the administrative level (Haller et. al, 2006). I imagine this can contribute to liberating neurodiverse experiences, as it would free us from labels and allow us to feel included and validated in our respective workspaces.

Summary of the Recommendations

The above recommendations are merely a few ways that the student affairs profession can help liberate neurodiverse people from the existing structures and negative stigma that surrounds neurodiversity in higher education. A common theme throughout the recommendations, however, is the desire for us, as a neurodivergent community, to feel like we matter. While I know that large-scale changes at institutions of higher education do not always occur quickly, the student affairs profession is ready to embrace neurodiverse voices. Hopefully, as the neurodivergent movement gains traction, more extensive efforts can address the struggles of neurodiverse populations in higher education.

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to use my own experience to amplify neurodiverse students and student affairs professionals. However, higher education still has considerable progress to make before it is a truly equitable, accessible industry for all people. Future research can explore the structures within the student affairs profession, and how we can use diverse voices to deconstruct inequitable systems within it. Furthermore, this paper focused on neurodiversity efforts across higher education and in the student affairs profession. Future studies can explore how different types of institutions (i.e. four-year versus two-year colleges, public vs., private institutions) address neurodiversity.

Higher education has significant progress to make before it is an equitable system for neurodiverse people. However, by confronting our biases and providing spaces for neurodiverse voices, we can create more accessible environments for neurotypical and neurodiverse people alike. Extensive efforts must

occur in the student affairs profession to amplify and empower neurodiverse students, deconstruct existing structures, and expose our own biases through our work in higher education.

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