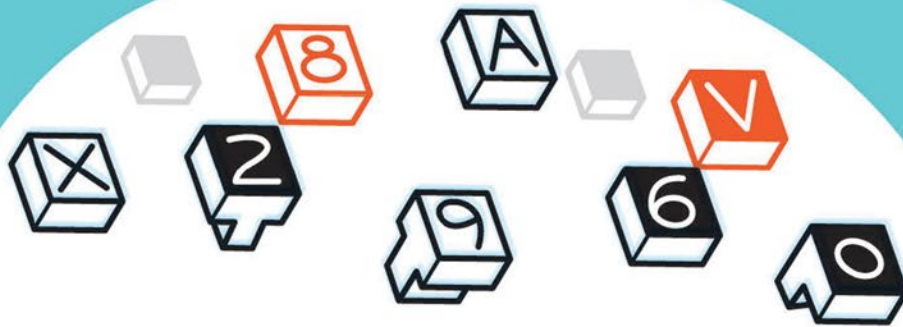


NEURODIVERSITY, ENTREPRENEURIAL THINKING, AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES



About 80 percent of neurodivergent college students begin their higher education at community colleges. These students are undervalued assets to our institutions and our nation.

By Maureen Dunne

NEURODIVERSITY IS AN INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT topic for community college leaders. For those unfamiliar with the term, “neurodiversity” refers to the range of human neurological profiles that we typically find in most communities around the world. This includes neurotypical people and neurodivergent people — those with different ways of learning and thinking, such as those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia (difficulty with reading and spelling), dyspraxia (developmental coordination disorder), hyperlexia (precocious ability to read along with reading comprehension challenges), synesthesia (atypically linked sensory perceptions), dyscalculia (mathematical learning disability), and other atypical cognitive typologies.

In other words, it comes down to understanding, supporting, and valuing the rich tapestry of human cognition as it actually exists, rather than starting with a box built around our assumptions for what sort of cognitive profiles best fit into the linear world we have constructed in our current post-industrial framework. This is a profound change in teaching and learning from traditional one-size-fits-all models and, as with every approach to improving inclusivity, it necessitates fundamentally resetting perceptions of what is valuable and, in some ways, our own values systems.

Inherent in the neurodiversity perspective is the importance of valuing all people — neurotypical and neurodivergent — through a strength-based lens. Current research suggests that about one in five people identify as neurodivergent.

Why should community college leaders care?

There is strong evidence that most neurodivergent students begin their higher education journeys at community colleges. A 2015 study published in *Autism Research and Treatment*, for example, estimated the percentage of autistic students who begin postsecondary training at community colleges to be as high as 80%.

Community colleges, with their open-admissions policy and high-quality offerings close to home, are attractive to many students with learning differences as they navigate the new frontier of college. Community colleges offer optionality and flexibility that many traditional four-year college campuses do not, including smaller classes, affordable tuition, and proximity to family and friends.

What most community college leaders don’t realize is how fast this segment of their student body is growing and will likely continue to expand in the future.

A recent study by ZenBusiness reported that about half of Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) students acknowledged some identification with the neurodivergent brand: “definitely” (22 percent) or “somewhat” (31 percent) neurodivergent. About three quarters of this same group reported they were interested in entrepreneurship as a career pathway. This was based on a survey connected with 1,000 respondents aged 18-25, one key demographic of college students.

In another study, about one in five Gen Z participants reported to

Tallo that they did not follow through in applying for a particular job because the company lacked supportive resources for neurodivergent people. A whopping 80% of respondents claimed they would like to apply for employment at a company that was supportive of those identifying as neurodivergent.

However you look at these results in combination with other data, analysis, and emerging trends, it is clear that both neurodiversity and entrepreneurship should be top of mind for community college stakeholders.

A Culture of Psychological Safety

When I was elected president of the Illinois Community College Trustees Association (ICCTA) — a body that represents legislative advocacy and trustee education for the third largest consortium of community colleges in the United States — I made it a priority to address unnecessary obstacles facing our students.

Last fall, ICCTA adopted our own neurodiversity inclusion statement to help guide policy at our member colleges. We then began to lobby the state government, and in May of this year, the Illinois General Assembly passed new legislation in the form of HR219 (“Neurodiversity in Higher Ed”).

HR219 encourages all institutions of higher education to adopt a similar values statement to create welcoming environments that value, support, and empower all students, neurodivergent and neurotypical alike. As formal legislation at the state level, HR219 is the first of its kind that we are aware of. It is my hope it inspires other states to follow suit and colleges to take further practical steps in fostering a culture of inclusivity. For instance, the availability of a quiet room on campus would benefit not only those neurodivergent students who may be prone to auditory sensitivity, but anyone looking to take a break from studying or socializing. Peer mentors and allies also can make a meaningful impact on one’s community college experience. This is a clear path to a better world, built of actionable policies and programs that help all students, including those with learning differences, thrive.

Another important emphasis in this effort was to include more than just the students. Our ICCTA Neurodiversity Inclusion values statement sought to acknowledge neurodivergent faculty, staff, trustees, and administrators as well. By encouraging a psychologically safe work environment, all members of the campus community will feel more comfortable with disclosure of their own neurodivergence, providing our neurodivergent students with powerful role models as they prepare to join the workplace of tomorrow.

In addition, I helped spearhead a new program called the Neurodiverse Entrepreneur Program — a partnership between Innovation DuPage (an entrepreneurship accelerator affiliated with College of DuPage) and the Autism Angels Group (the first social impact investment association focused on neurodiversity).

The program is currently headed toward its second-year cohort

and provides an equity-free grant, supportive resources, mentorship, and an entrepreneurial bootcamp workshop for inclusive early-stage companies with at least one neurodivergent teammate in a leadership role. The program is making waves in the venture capital world as a model for entrepreneurial thinking arising out of a community college substrate.

Moreover, there is a strong correlation between entrepreneurship and neurodiversity. In fact, many highly successful entrepreneurs have publicly discussed how their neurodivergence has led to their success. Richard Branson, for example, reported in *The Independent* that his “dyslexia became [his] massive advantage: It helped [him] to think creatively and laterally, and see solutions where others saw problems.”

Other successful neurodivergent entrepreneurs include David Neelan, the founder of JetBlue, an ADHDer, Charles Schwab, who is dyslexic, and Elon Musk, who was diagnosed with Asperger’s syndrome (now part of the autism spectrum).

Neurodiversity and the Future

Lateral thinking, complex visual-spatial skills, intuitive pattern recognition, nonlinear thinking, and creative insights will all become increasingly important skills in the future as artificial intelligence (AI) continues to embed itself within every facet of our everyday lives. Numerous studies suggest that neurodivergent cognition is positively associated with enhanced innovative thinking and creativity.

One such study published in 2016 in the *Creativity Research Journal* demonstrated how ADHD students scored significantly higher than their neurotypical peers on measures of originality, novelty, and flexibility for an invention task, as well as demonstrating increased cognitive flexibility in word association tests.

Another research study found those with strong autistic traits were far more likely to generate original ideas. This research was published in 2015 in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Yet another report published in *Cogent Psychology* documented similar findings when comparing dyslexic students and their neurotypical peers. Just as important as it is to understand differences between neurotypical and neurodivergent students, it’s vital to understand that neurodivergence is not monolithic. In other words, no two neurodivergent students are alike.

At the same time, in recent policy discussions the chair of the U.S. Federal Reserve, Jerome Powell, has remarked that the American labor market is suffering from a structural labor shortage. The reasons are varied, including an aging population, the tragic loss of many workers to COVID-19, a flux of early retirements, and a historic drop in immigration caused, in part, by Trump-era policy changes. By the end of 2022, there were approximately two job vacancies for every available worker, making for a total shortfall of around 10 million workers. As political economist

Nicholas Eberstadt put it, “The United States has a Depression-scale work problem.”

Higher education is also at an inflection point. High school graduates are increasingly questioning the value of higher education, along with the specter of unbearable student debt. They look to us, as community college leaders, to articulate the relevance of higher education to their future prospects.

This reality exists against the backdrop of an economic and technological landscape that is shifting under our feet. A recent PwC report estimated that by 2023, AI will add \$15 trillion to the global economy. By the mid-2030s, it is also set to potentially automate away around 30% of today’s jobs.

Community college and industry partnerships could be a game-changer in spearheading opportunities that lead to the jobs of the future, including neurodiversity-friendly opportunity pathways. This is a win-win as unemployment and underemployment rates sit at about 40% for neurodivergent people across typologies, and as high as 85% for autistic people historically. Employers are looking for uniquely talented, motivated, and loyal employees, and neurodivergent jobseekers are often unfairly overlooked despite their myriad abilities, skills, and talents.

One of my favorite analogies is to point out how steel, an alloy, is superior to iron, a pure metal, in just about every respect precisely because it is a combination of different elements with different properties complementing each other at a fundamental level. The same logic holds true with thriving organizational cultures, including higher education and industry. Diverse groups that foster collaboration among different types of minds are far more resilient and powerful than homogenous ones.

HR219 conveys the importance of valuing all kinds of minds as we help prepare our students for the future. While this legislation is a great starting point, we all can play a vital role as allies in welcoming neurodivergent thinkers on campus and in our communities.



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