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Supporting Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder and Neurodivergence: University of San Diego Accommodations and Resources

Carina Mendoza

University of San Diego, carinamendoza@sandiego.edu

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**Supporting Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder and Neurodivergence: University of
San Diego Accommodations and Resources**

Carina Elizabeth Mendoza

Prepared for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Higher Education Leadership

University of San Diego

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Acknowledgements

This research is dedicated to my little sister, and was a major inspiration for this research topic. She was diagnosed with ASD at the age of 15. She expressed that her general education teachers were not supporting her classroom experience and mental health concerns and instead ignoring them, or viewing them negatively. Her main challenges in the classroom included trouble connecting with peers, mood instability, sensory processing issues and executive functioning skills like keeping track of assignments and attention. Everything from following basic instructions, reading comprehension and math formulas were a challenge. Her experiences left me questioning what neurodiversity looks like for students in the classroom, how students are best being supported and if higher education students are going through similar experiences in the classroom. I hope these findings help you if you choose to go to college and help you find peace within yourself. I love you so much.

There were a handful of individuals who played a critical role in providing feedback and validation to my research process, to whom I am immensely grateful. The MAHE and doctoral students working alongside me in my Action Research class served as critical friends and offered constructive criticisms and questions within my methods and writing. I would also like to thank Dr. Chris Burden, Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs for Student Wellness, for providing valuable insight regarding my design and population. Dr. Cheryl Getz and Dr. Nydia Sanchez have also been valuable sources during my research and offered insightful feedback and help with my overall design. My supervisor Claire Gosen in the Center for Health and Wellness Promotion, also played a pivotal role in ensuring the study's success by holding me accountable for upcoming deadlines, mental health check-ins and her affirming motivation. Lastly, I would like to thank my partner Alexander and my dog Luca for their unconditional love and support.

Abstract

This research focuses on better understanding the unique classroom experiences faced by autistic and neurodiverse students at the University of San Diego (USD) and offers recommendations to improve their college experience. Through a well-studied literature review and data collection through semi structured interviews and focus groups, the overall goal was to have a more holistic understanding of the current support services from faculty and staff that are available for students at USD. The study will provide unique challenges and curated recommendations for students with autism spectrum disorder and neurodiverse identities. This research also identifies specific areas where the USD can make practical modifications to its already existing practices to better neurodiverse students in the classroom, while taking into consideration their unique needs and circumstances.

Keywords: Neurodiversity, autism, disability, autism spectrum disorder, higher education, accommodations, mental health

Supporting Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder and Neurodivergence: University of San Diego, Accommodations and Resources

Introduction

This study examined the unique needs and challenges that students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and neurodivergence experience at the University of San Diego (USD). The neurodiversity movement originally began in the 1990s and social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok during the COVID-19 global pandemic made headlines in the neurodiversity movement. Here, communities noticed an influx where users shared their diagnosis, raised awareness about disabilities, late diagnosis stories, stimming behaviors and experiences navigating a global pandemic with neurodiversity. While TikTok served as a gateway to increasing awareness, more can be done regarding this specific population. The study examined the existing literature, then provided insights into my role as a researcher. Subsequently, the study will disclose my younger sister's experiences in school and her recent autism diagnosis. The study will delve into the main research approach, design, and major findings. Finally, the limitations of the study will be discussed and there will be proposed recommendations for the faculty and students at USD.

Background & Literature Review

The term 'neurodiversity' has been used as a common phrase to describe autism; however, in recent times, this has expanded to encapsulate a spectrum of differences like "attention, language, memory, socializing, and a whole host of other cognitive functions" (Coupé, 2021). Researchers looking into how to best support neurodivergent students generally focus on either exploring the unique needs of students, or different ideas and approaches to instructing them.

The Needs of Students

University students with Neurodiversity experience a multitude of different experiences than their neurotypical peers. This includes co-occurring mental health challenges, difficulty transitioning into higher education and the requiring more holistic support and tailored programming.

Understanding Mental Health

Anxiety and depression are the most commonly diagnosed mental health issues among autistic people, with between 40 and 80% of adults meeting clinical criteria (Scott et al., 2023). Researchers have been looking for ways to better understand and support these identities. Hu and Chandrasekhar (2020) emphasize the need for comprehensive counseling and mental health services on campus. They surveyed university and college counseling centers (UCCCs) directors and addressed themes related to their experiences with neurodivergent students, campus partnerships and barriers to improving services. The University and college counseling center directors were found to not have comprehensive understanding of the unique needs of students with ASD and exhibited a lack of awareness with various co-occurring mental health needs and asking for help.

A study conducted in Japan by Miyasaka and Nomura (2022) investigated attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and ASD-related symptoms and later co-occurring mental health challenges in college students. This was a longitudinal survey in which participants took the survey two times 8 months apart from each other. The main key findings of the study revealed that there was a large number of student participants that have ADHD and the need for support for students with ASD and ADHD and early diagnosis for students in college. Similar to

the Hu and Chandrasekhar (2020) article, there is a need for greater awareness and university support systems.

Belcher et al. (2023) conducted surveys related to participant social-functioning, ASD diagnoses and mental health. There was a vast amount of findings that touched on key themes of Empathy and Social functioning in women, misdiagnosis, camouflaging and Masking and misdiagnosed for women with overlapping symptoms of autism. This article was pertaining to my research question due to the idea of making and co-occurring mental health symptoms in female identifying students. The idea that some students can sit through a classroom and partake in masking behaviors stuck out to me and I was curious to learn if the USD students always exhibit similar classroom behaviors.

Student Transitions into Higher Education

White et al. (2017) developed a support program for students with ASD, who are transitioning from high school to college. Known as the Stepped Transition in Education Program for Students with ASD, this program offers a range of services, including academic coaching, social skills training, and sensory support, to help students successfully navigate the transition and achieve their academic and personal goals (White et al., 2017). The program was designed to work simultaneously with disability services on campus and has been found to offer a high potential for supporting students with ASD. Additionally, the program creates a sense of community and belonging, which can be particularly important for students with ASD who may experience social difficulties and isolation. The study highlighted the importance of providing targeted support for students with ASD during the college transition process and proposes a framework for doing so (White et al., 2017). This practice could have the potential to be effective and beneficial. I also found this valuable to my research questions due to the well thought out

approach of the description and development of Stepped Transition in Education Program for Students.

Zeedyk et al. (2014) highlights the importance of providing targeted support to students with ASD, who are transitioning from high school to college. Zeedyk talks widely about the unique challenges these students face such as sensory sensitivities, social/communication difficulties and executive dysfunction and how to provide targeted educational support. In order to defend her argument, she references the NLTS2 dataset, a nationally representative longitudinal study that followed students with ASD and other disabilities as they transitioned from high school to postsecondary education. The article also talks about a program with a series of supports such as academic coaching, social skills training and individualized accommodations.

Overall, the journal provides valuable insights about the challenges faced by students with ASD while transitioning to postsecondary education and employment. This study is valuable to my research questions because it offers a detailed analysis of strategies and target support systems and is quite frank about the lack of literature about the effectiveness of college preparation/training programs for youth on the spectrum (Zeedyk et al., 2014). I was curious about the scarce literature and am currently looking for more empirical research for testing on the effectiveness of supports for individuals with ASD who attend college.

Sefotho and Onyishi (2020) investigated the challenges that students with ASD face when transitioning to higher education in Nigeria, West Africa. The study used a phenomenological research design and conducted one-on-one interviews with 10 first-year students with ASD from higher education institutions in Nigeria. The interviews were guided by a semi structured interview schedule and were categorized into major themes such as academic

functioning difficulties, social difficulties, structural issues, mental health problems, and lack of resources and support (Sefotho & Onyishi, 2020). Overall, the study shows the need of importance for providing individualized support services to promote the academic success, social integration, and overall wellbeing of students with ASD as they transition to higher education institutions in West Africa. I am very interested in this specific piece of literature because of its global perspective and highlights the importance of identifying common challenges and support needs for students with ASD across different cultural and contextual backgrounds in higher education. Having had the opportunity to travel to South Africa, I am especially curious to learn more about the university systems and their support structures for students with diverse abilities on a global scale.

Challenges

Anderson (2018) studies experiences of university students with ASD in college. She explored the unique challenges faced by university students with ASD through on-line questionnaires and interviews with 12 university students from three different universities in the United States and universities in Australia. The students were interviewed about their experiences in college and their challenges in academic and social aspects as well as the types of support they received from their university. The data was collected through qualitative measures. The findings of the study reveal several challenges faced by students with ASD, including difficulties with social interactions, sensory sensitivities, and executive functioning skills. Many students also reported feeling overwhelmed by the demands of college, particularly with regard to time management and organization.

Universal Design for Learning

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a common and well researched approach to remove barriers to learning that can be applied to neurodivergent students. (Austin & Peña, 2017) found that supportive faculty members tended to follow three key UDL approaches: structured scaffolding, comprehensive accommodations, and collaborative institutional support. Dubie et al. (2019) share effective teaching practices for teachers to implement to make the classroom a more inclusive environment for all types of learners. For example, she proposed teaching practices for partner and small group work in the classroom setting that best encompass learning with ASD. These include elements such as adding structure to group work, both written and verbal step-by-step instruction, visual supports, and allowing students to choose their own partners (providing some form of predictability when choosing a partner).

Austin & Peña et al.'s (2017) research synthesizes already existing research on promising instructional practices for college students with autism. The article does not have a specific set of methods that it draws conclusions from and is a comprehensive analysis on the existing literature. Austin & Peña et al. (2017) used a systematic and critical approach to reviewing the literature and reviewing sources from books, journals and academic publications. This literature review addresses common themes and trends in the research such as the statistical numbers of college students with autism, challenges, instructional practices and UDL as an assessing learning tool. The research from Austin & Peña held relevance to my research because it directly relates to neurodivergent college students and focuses directly on the needs and challenges. It also gives helpful insights that can be useful for educators and institutions to support neurodivergent college students more effectively.

Williams (2016) shared that the number of students with ASD pursuing higher education is increasing and that “students with ASD are at risk for anxiety and depression due to chronic stress and challenge presented in the campus environment” (p. 48). Oftentimes, educators and faculty are at risk to look past mental health and wellbeing challenges that their students present. Williams (2016) shares, “The beauty of UDL is that it reaches those who need it, whether or not they have been identified as having that need” (p. 50). By implementing a UDL in the college and university classrooms, this will help mitigate unseen changes and ‘hidden disabilities’ of students. Although the research is saying that there are specific support systems in place to support the students with disabilities in the classroom, addressing the mental health needs of these students is equally important.

Tailored Programming

LeGary et al. (2019) managed a study to better understand the experiences of college students with ASD and how it is related to social support. LeGary (2019) used a qualitative research design to further explore the students unique experiences through in-depth interviews. He recruited 16 college students with ASD and their age ranged from 19-24 years old and were enrolled in a 2-to 4-year college. According to the findings, social support is a critical factor for college students with ASD to manage the ever changing challenges of college/university life. The dataset concluded that social support was critical for managing stress related to academic depends and social challenges such as difficulties making friends, and partaking in group activities.

Overall, the study summarizes the importance and need for colleges/universities to provide social support services to promote student success among students with ASD during

their transition to college life. I conducted my qualitative research through in depth interviews and focus groups with faculty ally and neurodivergent students.

Viezel et al. (2020) addresses social, communication and executive functioning needs of students with ASD. Her research hypotheses led her to further explore the importance of designing programs that are tailored to meet the individual needs of each student with ASD. She discussed a wide range of models to best support these students such as peer-mentorship programs, academic support programs, sensory support programs and social skills groups. Also, the article discusses the importance of input from students with ASD and for them to be a large part of the continuous assessment process to ensure the validity of the programming. The data was collected through a statistical analysis of (Spearman rank-order correlation) to explore the relationship between program costs and the amount of support offered in college-based support programs for students with ASD. They used this method because the data did not meet the requirements for a Pearson correlation which could disrupt the validity of the results. Overall, this study emphasizes the importance of college-based support programs that are directly correlated to the students' unique needs.

The research all shared a similar connection and directly relates to neurodivergent college students and focuses directly on the needs and challenges. It also gives helpful insights that can be useful for educators and institutions to support neurodivergent college students more effectively. The studies listed above all contain valuable insights to questions regarding the parallel between students with an ASD diagnosis and comorbid mental health concerns as well as best practices and frameworks like UDL support neurodivergent students in the classroom. Comparably, the research points to students with ASD being able to succeed in college with appropriate support from their university counseling centers, providing accommodations for

learning and disabilities, and access to counseling services. The main approaches that other researchers used to approach participant selection used the Photovoice technique which involves participants taking photographs that capture their personal perspectives, experiences, and opinions through photographic storytelling and the importance of incorporating visual support and spoken step-by-step instructions integrated within teaching styles.

Context

I conducted my research at the USD. Currently, I work as a graduate assistant in the Center for Health and Wellness Promotion at USD and am a student in the master of arts in higher education and leadership program at USD. My studies and work experiences have led to my passion for helping students better prepare for the transition and resources to be successful through the high school/college process. In my role, my team and I engage in education, awareness, and training programs among educators that can lead to better outcomes for students academically. This research can help educators, facilities and students gain a better understanding of the unique challenges their children face throughout this transition process as well as better understand institutional support services for students with ASD. Due to the sensitive population that my research question is focused on, I asked the Assistant Vice President of Student Wellness at USD to serve as a mentor while requesting guidance on the ethical considerations for my Action research and my overall questions. In order to engage others in my niche context, I shared my own personal experiences through storytelling, focus groups, talking to people who are passionate about this around campus, including the counseling/wellness center, disability resources, Center for Student Success, and faculty members. These conversations were used to inform my knowledge and understanding about this

issue to build trust with the people involved in my research. I was actively working with the USD Assistant Vice President of Student Wellness Dr. Chris Burden to help guide my research.

Project Rationale

Post the COVID-19 global pandemic, there has been an influx of ASD and neurodivergent diagnoses in students attending postsecondary education programs. “Studies in the United States suggest that 0.3%–1.9% of postsecondary students are autistic. Five percent of incoming American students report attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which does not include those whose ADHD is undisclosed/undiagnosed” (Dwyer, 2023, p. 3). To identify challenges and unique needs of students with neurodivergence, semi structured interviews, and focus groups with faculty and student participants were conducted at USD. The results were analyzed on themes and challenges that the student and faculty allies disclosed.

Research Design

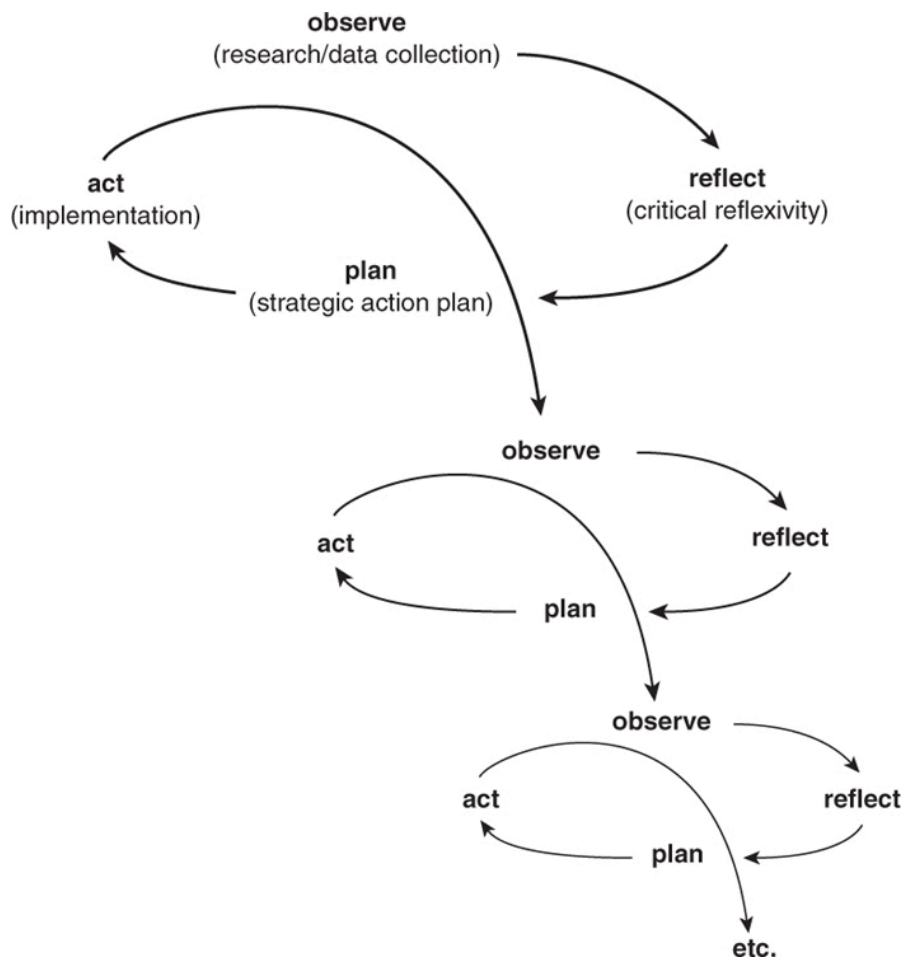
Students and faculty were recruited into the study through the use of flyers posted around the USD campus. This study follows O’Leary’s (2010) cycle of research methodology, which sets a framework to refine the research process through data-driven iteration. Through surveys, semi structured interviews, and focus groups, this study honed in on the unique experiences of neurodiverse students, and the ways that faculty can best support them. The goal was to identify patterns and areas where classroom inclusivity for neurodiverse students may not be adequately addressed and to determine specific needs that require addressing on a larger scale within the classroom.

According to Kosy (2011), “O’Leary sees action research as an experiential learning approach, to change, where the goal is to continually refine the methods, data, and interpretation in light of the understanding developed in each earlier cycle” (p. 6). This is depicted in Figure 1

and directly aligned with all of the aspects of my research and helped me keep a holistic and curious lens with my faculty and student participants. As Kosy (2011) notes, the flexibility to make changes as we see fit is essential for affecting change. With the sensitive nature of the research question, participants were asked to be vulnerable and share sacred parts of their identity/shortcomings.

Figure 1

Concept for Cycles in Action Research



Koshy, V., Waterman, H., & Law, S. (2011).

One of the key strengths of the research design was meeting in person with participants, and using flexible semistructured interview questions to guide the conversation. This allowed for variability in student and faculty experiences and perspectives into the research design to create a deeper understanding of the unique challenges at hand. However, there were also challenges and limitations that were considered within this population, such as the difficulty in recruiting a student who identifies openly as being neurodivergent and the potential for my own bias when researching this specific population of students similar to my younger sister. It was critical that I was fully aware of all of the unique factors and used the best design methods to lessen the impacts of these limitations on the study's outcome.

Data Collection

I used two cycles for my research. In the first cycle, I met one-on-one with faculty allies and neurodivergent students to gain a more clear understanding about the classroom experiences and challenges faced by neurodiverse/AND undergraduate students. In the second cycle, I had the same participants come together in a focus group to discuss questions that emerged from key themes during the individual interviews. As the PI, I intentionally curated the focus group, a safe/brave space where we had set ground rules together ensuring the safety and confidentiality for everyone involved. The purpose of the focus group was to gain a deeper insight from student and faculty voices where concerns can be heard from both parties.

Description of Cycle 1

Cycle 1 involved active recruitment and outreach to both students and faculty at USD, and engaged undergraduate students with ASD or neurodiversity identities to share their experiences and challenges at the university. I recruited faculty allies with a passion and

commitment to supporting neurodiverse students and neurodivergent students to share their experiences and classroom strategies. Cycle 1 took place in the fall of 2023.

In total, I had five participants who wanted to share data for this cycle. There were four female-identifying undergraduate students, and two faculty members - one male and one female. The students were all undergraduates at USD and the faculty members were part of various teaching departments.

The interview provided the student participants the option to choose between a seated interview or a “walk & talk” interview, a decision that was guided by the goal to minimize feelings of sensory overload and flexibility and a stimulating and changing environment. Through semi structured interviews with 17-20 questions, we covered a wide range of topics related to student participants’ experiences. This included professor/classmate interactions, coping strategies, accommodations, challenges, learning experiences, contributions to discussions and disclosure. Additionally, we discussed the unique needs and valuable lessons and learning strategies that work independently for each student.

In addition to the student experiences, faculty members also took part in the one-on-one semi structured interviews addressing advocacy, misunderstanding and awareness, support and challenges, visibility and additional insights through a total of 17 questions. Faculty participants were also given the opportunity to do a ‘walk & talk’ interview that aligned with the inclusive and flexible approach of the research. I used a mixed methods framework for all of the cycles to gain a more holistic perspective on the experiences and challenges of the student and faculty participants.

Cycle 1: Findings

The individual interviews that were conducted at USD explored the experiences and challenges faced by neurodivergent and those with ASD. The participants included students and faculty members who shared their personal experiences and observations. Notable themes that I took away from the individual interviews were related to accessibility, accommodations, self-advocacy, diverse learning styles, social misconceptions, and mentorship and guidance for neurodivergent students. Student participants also shared that when faculty members encouraged students to seek accommodations through the Disability and Learning Resources Center (DLDRC) that is where the support ends. There is a common thread of students' perspectives stating that their faculty try to provide a quick fix much like a bandage on a deep wound. Students also shared the importance of feeling safe while advocating for their needs but can be hard when faculty members don't seem approachable. One student shared, "It can be uncomfortable to say, 'Hey, I need this accommodation,' because you're explaining your neurodiversity and they might not understand." Student participants also recognized that student learning styles and specific needs are not always provided in the classroom. When talking about misconceptions about neurodiversity the group came to a consensus that disabilities and different ways of learning exist and it is sometimes misrepresented in what we see in the media and shows. One participant pointed out "People have such a narrow view of what this looks like for someone" Also mentioned, was the idea of creating safe inclusive and quiet spaces on campus for students who get overstimulated and leaning into conversations and community with other students who share similar experiences. "I feel like we should have more research studies like these, open to other students at USD It will help raise more awareness through the population that's here now, neurotypical, but also figuring out what we can do as a school to feel

better.” Also shared by the participants was their positive experiences with mentorship and advisories who helped them advocate for their unique needs. Table 1 below includes comments from participants organized by themes.

Table 1

Participant testimonials

Themes	Quotes
Stigma on Accommodations	<p>“I don’t want people to think that I need more support or that I’m not competent enough, like I’m not good enough.”</p> <p>“I think we should create a safe space for those who get overstimulated really easily. Not like a separate space that differentiates anyone, but more of a place where it’s noise-free and there are calmer environments to help those who are overstimulated just to feel safe at USD”</p> <p>“I think some professors want you to believe they know everything, which doesn’t really invite conversation or different perspectives.”</p>
Assumptions about teachings	<p>“I’ve had professors who don’t think there’s a problem with their way of doing things, so they just don’t address it.”</p>
Misunderstandings	<p>“I feel like people don’t see it as a cognitive thing but more like a physical thing, when in reality, it can be all of the above.”</p>
Sensory Processing	<p>“And that’s the thing with the type of sensitivity. I can detect tones so easily, and all of a sudden, if a tone drops, I’ll think, “Oh no, I did something wrong.” It’s usually when I hear a tone change, depending on the nuances,</p>

	<p>I'll think, "Oh no. And what did I do? Did I just say something wrong?"</p> <p>"I think we should create a safe space for those who get overstimulated really easily. Not like a separate space that differentiates anyone, but more of a place where it's noise-free and there are calmer environments to help those who are overstimulated just to feel safe at USD."</p>
Awareness	<p>"I actually think about my responsibility to provide content in multiple ways because not everyone accesses things the same way."</p> <p>"I assume all brains are unique."</p>
Inclusivity	<p>"You don't necessarily need to show me your faculty who have ADHD, but rather maybe create spaces where there are centers for teaching and learning, right? Does that Center for Teaching and Learning have an initiative, or a program, or a workshop event for learning styles and learning differences? Where they bring faculty together to talk about how they learn differently or approach things differently, and maybe how their students would, and what to do with a very different student body."</p>
Masking	<p>"I mask a lot"</p>
Anxiety	<p>"Asking questions can be very daunting and anxiety-inducing."</p> <p>"Whereas with anxiety, I sometimes feel that a professor might see it as an excuse for not wanting to do an assignment or not understanding something."</p> <p>"I think some of my professors, they understand that there's me who struggles with something like anxiety, but there are other people with different kinds of neurodiversity, whether they have ADHD or something like</p>

	that, where I feel like professors haven't been accommodating to their needs.”
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Description of Cycle 2

The second cycle was a focus group that brought together USD students and faculty allies. This discussion was geared to share lived experiences as neurodiverse/ASD undergraduate and faculty who want to learn more and foster a space where faculty members can engage with students who have first-hand experiences. As the moderator, I led the focus group through 20 questions that synthesized key themes and questions from the one-on-one interviews. Due to scheduling conflicts, I hosted two separate focus groups in December 2023.

The first focus group consisted of one female identifying faculty member and two female identifying undergraduate students. The second focus group featured two faculty allies and an undergraduate female-identifying student. Also - this group included a female faculty ally from the biology department who was unable to do a one-on-one interview.

I intentionally created this focus group setting to provide a safe space for students to share their unique experiences, challenges, and ideas for best practices. The conversation and questions engaged faculty members to also contribute their insights and experiences to bridge the understanding between neurodiverse students and their faculty.

Cycle 2: Findings

The focus of Cycle 2 was conducted at USD exploring the experiences and challenges faced by neurodivergent students and students with ASD. The participants included students and faculty members who shared their personal experiences and observations. Notable themes that I took away from the Focus Group were the students' experiences of being misunderstood, and

awareness/stigmas that exist surrounding their needs. Firstly, participants discussed instances where their racial and neurodivergent identities led to them feeling misunderstood or othered. For example, one participant shared feelings different in a predominantly white community, while another discussed the challenges of communicating differently due to their neurodivergence. What was also highlighted in the group conversation was that people refer to neurodiversity as the term “learning differences” which is more commonly used in place of a spectrum of diverse needs. The faculty members that I met with during my study shared that they want to help students with unique and diverse needs but admitted to feeling unprepared and lacking partnerships with campus resources to connect students with and reliance on the Disability and Learning Difference Resource Center and Counseling Services. One professor shared, “We are [learning] together and we don’t have the tools; I don’t have the tools to manage that, and I rely on you guys.” Student participants also talked about their positions when asking for accommodations, such as needing more time for tests or managing deadlines because they don’t want to feel othered from their peers. The focus group participants also emphasized the need for empathy and intervention when students exhibit signs of distress or mental health challenges in class. A large part of the conversation was discussing the call for more dialogue in our education systems to talk about neurodivergence and a shift in mindset around more accessible teaching practices. When asked about hopes and changes for the future, participants shared that they want a future where neurodiversity is better understood and accommodated, with more conversations around it. Another student participant shared “ “I think a big part of it is just asking questions, which goes such a long way.” If faculty are more inquisitive and want to better understand their students, questions are one route. Table 2 shows the various comments made by participants organized around themes that emerged.

Table 2*Participant testimonials*

Themes	Quotes
Tools	“We are living together and we don’t have the tools; I don’t have the tools to manage that, and I rely on you guys.”
Awareness	“I don’t hear a lot of conversation about neurodivergence; we’ve not focused on it in a way that comes through.”
Inclusivity	“I think just continuing to appreciate the differences that we have will be really important.”
Performative	“I’ve had a similar experience where it felt quite performative, just putting that on the syllabus to have it there”
Inclusivity	“I get overstimulated very easily, I think we should create a safe space for those who get overstimulated really easily. Not like a separate space that differentiates anyone, but more of a place where it’s noise-free and there are calmer environments to help those who are overstimulated just to feel safe at USD.”
Awareness	<p>“I’ve never been part of a conversation on campus where people acknowledge that there are going to be different people in this room, in this classroom with different ways of learning”</p> <p>“Since coming back from COVID, my teaching practices have changed quite a bit. I’m more diligent about making materials, such as PowerPoints, available online”</p> <p>“What sucks about getting accommodations here is that how good it is really depends on the teacher you are working with and I also have teachers who will act like it is a burden to get your accommodations met”</p> <p>“I feel like because I have a learning disability, I have to be removed from class to get what I need”</p> <p>“Why can’t I get the help I need in class?”</p>

Overall Emergent Themes

Mental Health Challenges

While analyzing the findings from the interviews with neurodivergent students I found there to be a spectrum of neurodiverse students who also experience mental health challenges. For example, one participant shared “I’ve gotten pretty good at masking anxiety and holding my emotions in until after class where then I will have a panic attack or burst into tears“ when talking about their experiences of anxiety in the classroom.

In the context of mental health, masking refers to the behavior or coping mechanism individuals may employ to hide or conceal their true thoughts, feelings, or difficulties related to their mental health (Charlie Health Editorial Team, 2023). Unfortunately, these situations are not uncommon for neurodivergent and autistic students to go through. Anxiety and depression are the most commonly diagnosed mental health issues among autistic people, with between 40 and 80% of adults meeting clinical criteria (Lugo-Marín et al., 2019). The student also expressed the frustrations that come with the fact that some professors do not accommodate their needs and how they think their professors experience their anxiety. The students described their professor’s view of their anxiety as a “cop out” for not wanting to do assignments. Despite the students’ struggles with anxiety and asking questions in class, they found that connecting with others in class who might share similar questions creates this mutual understanding that also in turn validates their mental health challenges and fear with asking questions during class.

Sensory Challenges

Challenges students expressed were related to sensory processing and how they experience the university. One student participant shared that they get overstimulated and are naturally sensitive to loud sounds and the bright LED lights in the classroom. They also shared

their challenges with visual processing in things like making eye contact with professors and discomfort with direct light. Similarly, researchers (Nolan et al., 2023), examined the environmental barriers that impacted students' performance based on a sensory perspective. Their findings highlighted the importance of inclusive sensory designs and a sensory friendly environment on campuses.

Executive Functioning Challenges

Another theme that emerged throughout the student participants were challenges with executive functioning like planning and prioritizing, attention and focus, phonemic awareness, working memory and organization. In one example, a student shared a story from when they were in class and mispronounced a word while answering a question the professor proposed to the class. When the student responded with the answer in which they thought was correct, the professor talked down to them replying "did you just look up that answer on chat gpt?" Those with neurodivergence have more difficulty with phonetic awareness.

Lack of Awareness, Tools, and Education

Lastly, another major theme that occurred was the lack of awareness, tools and education around how to best support neurodivergent students. One student participant shared that they were diagnosed the summer before college and "a big part of my college experience was learning what works for me and advocating for myself." She talked through how she has actively tried to better understand her brain, how she learns best and systems to set up for her to excel in her university classes. Another theme that came up was from a professor who wanted to learn more about the unique needs of their neurodivergent student learners but didn't feel like they had the tools.. Lastly, a student also proposed that faculty and universities should change the way and

language that accommodations and disabilities are talked about because oftentimes it is in a negative, deficit way.

Limitations

This study has presented a multitude of limitations. Firstly, the sensitive nature of research raised valid concerns regarding the potential for psychological and emotional harm that could be put upon the participants, and how it is imperative to follow all ethical standards throughout the study. The overall sample size collected was relatively small and therefore limits the generalization of the results to the broader neurodiverse population at USD. Limitations throughout also included my own biases as a neurodiverse researcher who also has a family member on the autism spectrum.

Both Cycles 1 and 2 had limitations when it came to scheduling meeting times to conduct the interviews with the participants. Too, the lack of gender in the participants who chose to take part in my study were all female-identifying. Both the female identifying participants were in the focus groups with USD faculty members with distinct power dynamics at play which could impact participant responses. The study's focus on a restricted number of faculty members—only three—may not fully have fully captured the diversity of perspectives within the faculty at USD. Consequently, the findings may not comprehensively reflect the spectrum of faculty experiences related to neurodiversity. The student participant experiences, as shared in interviews and focus groups, are all inherently subjective. Acknowledging the individualized nature of these statements is essential when interpreting the results, and recognizing the spectrum of differences within the neurodiverse population. There were also faculty allies present which may have affected the student participant responses in fear that they would have negative repercussions in that class. Lastly, the neurodivergent student participants could have been masking/camouflaging

their behaviors during interviews and focus groups which adds another layer of complexity to my study.

Recommendations

According to my major findings and participant data, the recommendations for faculty and educators are grouped into the following categories; awareness and education, accommodations and best practices, and prioritize student mental wellbeing.

Awareness and Education

While in discussion with the study participants, discussions around awareness, tools and education were at the forefront. It is necessary to create a system where faculty can gather monthly to talk about neurodiversity and their students' needs and encourage faculty to be part of the USD Safe Space Allies network and Rainbow Educator program to build awareness, educate, and engage the USD community around identities such as sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity, and class, while promoting the inclusion and visibility of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) communities. It is crucial that faculty and professors are aware of these programs and understand that neurodivergence and sexual identities may be interrelated. According to a recent study, at Cambridge University, autistic people might be three times more likely to identify as trans (Warrier et al., 2020). It is critical that all students have a safe space where they can be their authentic selves and have the resources in order to do so. Letting the students pick their own partners in group work (assigned group work for partners). Condensed study group outside of class with professor, office hours. In addition, faculty and professors could implement inclusion of neurodiversity in their syllabus, reaching students who may hold this identity and acknowledging that their classroom is a safe space for them.

Accommodations / Best Practices

In addition to awareness, this study has concluded that the classroom environment and professor directly impacts the students' success. Sensory friendly classroom designs could include the following: flexible seating option with spinning chairs, movement breaks/breaks in general, executive functioning tools (email reminders, canva alerts and g-cal invites), browsers and camera settings (one participant shared that when they fidget during a protracted exam that they fear the sensors are going to go off and that the professor will think that they are cheating), and wheelchair accessible classroom designs. Some other examples include: Graphic organizers that are things you can look for in the reading. Class participation in small groups over large group participation. Captions on videos and films being shared in class and color-blind friendly powerpoints. Additionally, it's possible that students may avoid class if faculty 'cold call' them out in front of the group. Finally, implementing a Universal Design for learning like presenting the information in more than one format or providing different ways that students can showcase their knowledge will make the classroom environment accessible for all types of learners. Additional resources for support can be found in table 3.

Prioritize Student Mental Wellbeing

There have been numerous studies that have found the intersectionality and mental health challenges and neurodivergence. A study from Psychology today shares "autism has been associated with higher rates of anxiety, eating disorders, gender dysphoria, mood disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder, personality disorders, schizophrenia, and substance misuse disorders" (Kirby 2021). Student participants shared that finding community and safe spaces with their identities can be emotionally taxing and they are interested in peer support groups

though the USD counseling center where they can have open and honest conversations about neurodiversity and connect with others sharing similar experiences.

Table 3

Additional Resources

Resources	Description
Neurodiversity TedTalk (The New Normal) Cynthia Coupe (Coupé, 2021).	“A self-diagnosed neurodivergent, Cynthia is a Speech Language Pathologist committed to transforming traditional systems to better serve people with special needs”
The Future is Neurodivergent Jennifer Poynt Poyntz, J. (2023, June, 8)	“Jennifer reflects passionately on her journey and talks about the increased population who are coming to understand their neurodivergence and become empowered by their differences”
Reminders for Disability and Learning Difference Students	Ensuring that there is a DSPP sanction in the syllabus and in class announcement before every quiz and exam.
Surveys on Supporting Students beyond Mid-semester Eval	Encouraging students to check in during office hours and offering optional surveys throughout class
Flexibility with deadlines	Due dates for assignments and papers being used as suggestions
Sensory Overload Awareness	Be aware of sensory overload for students (I.e clutter, noise, lighting, furniture)
Executive Functioning Skills Awareness	Using email reminders, canvas alerts, planners, calendars with linked assignments to help remind students of upcoming deadlines.
Recorded Class Sessions and Uploaded Slides	Having class sessions recorded and uploaded to canvas / slides uploaded to canvas for

	students to go back and review materials they may have missed during the lectures
Movement Breaks	Incorporating optional movement breaks for students to move their body in a way that feels comfortable and to support with attention/focus and sensory regulation
Representation in Texts and Assignments	Models and examples of people with disabilities and mental health challenges in the text and assignments
The Neurodiversity Edge by Maureen Dunne Dunne, M. (2024)	This book provides a positive and neuro-affirming framework on Neurodiversity
Divergent Mind: Thriving in a World That Wasn't Designed for You by Jenara Nerenberg Nerenberg, J. (2020)	This book sheds light on the experiences of neurodivergent women
Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity by Steve Silberman Silberman, S. (2015)	This book uses an advocacy based perspective and talks through the history of neurodiversity
Neuro-affirming statements	<p>“What support do you need from me?”</p> <p>“Your unique perspectives are important”</p> <p>“Normal is a societal construct and all brains work differently”</p> <p>“Your needs and accommodations are valid and I am willing to work with you and support you the best way I can”</p> <p>“That sounds really challenging to navigate.. I am here for you”</p> <p>“Your needs are valid”</p> <p>“How can I make my classroom a safe/brave space for you?”</p>

Conclusion

The guiding question for this research was: What are the unique challenges and experiences of students with ASD and neurodivergence? The study aimed to identify and better understand the unique challenges that students with ASD and neurodivergence experience at USD. In order to gauge a more in depth understanding of the day to day school-classroom challenges through semi structured interviews, and focus groups. The goal was to identify patterns and areas where classroom inclusivity for neurodiverse students may not be adequately addressed and to determine specific needs that require addressing on a larger scale within the classroom. The data from student and faculty participants was analyzed and categorized into major themes; mental health challenges, sensory challenges, executive functioning challenges and the lack of awareness, tools and education among peers and faculty.

It is critical for faculty to be aware of the co-occurring mental health challenges that their neurodivergent students experience such as depression and anxiety. They can best support this student population by creating more sensory friendly classrooms and implementing a UDL. They can implement a neurodiversity support section in their syllabus or take part in campus advocacy groups to learn more about student identities and experiences.

Students can best support faculty by asking for understanding, clearly communicating their needs, visiting office hours to check-in about how they are doing in the class. Also, students can help facilitate their own learning experiences by teaching and encourage peers and faculty to learn more about neurodiversity through readings, articles and discussions.

It is up to us as leaders, educators and clinicians in the field to best inform our community of the harm we have caused to our students and promote healing through inclusive

learning environments. The first step could be supporting the unique and diverse needs of our ever changing higher education student population.

Reflections on Personal Experiences

Throughout the entirety of the research process, this specific topic has made me excited and wanting to explore more about the themes related to disability awareness, ableism, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). I plan to pursue a PhD in Clinical Psychology later down the road so I can do more research about the neurodivergent population.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS FOR A STUDY TITLED:

“Supporting Students with ASD and Neurodiversity:
University of San Diego Accommodations and Resources”

LOOKING FOR:

**UNDERGRADS WITH ASD OR NEURODIVERSE IDENTITIES
TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES OR CHALLENGES AT USD
IN:**

- One-on-One Interview (90 Minutes)
- Community Focus Group (90 Minutes)

**FACULTY PASSIONATE ABOUT SUPPORTING THESE
STUDENTS TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES AND
CLASSROOM STRATEGIES AT USD IN:**

- One-on-One Interview (90 Minutes)
- Community Focus Group (90 Minutes)

Please note all interviews and focus groups will be held in person at USD and will be audio-recorded. Participants will receive a \$60 gift card. Additionally, food, snacks, and drinks will be provided during the focus group.

Interested and want to learn more?

Scan the QR code or contact us:

Carina Mendoza: carinamendoza@sandiego.edu

Nydia Sanchez: nydiasanchez@sandiego.edu



Appendix B

Interview Guide

USD Faculty 1-1 interview script

INTERVIEW SCRIPT FOR FACULTY

Hi, my name is Carina Mendoza and I am in my second year in the Masters of Higher Education program here at USD. I would like to thank you for taking the time to participate today. I really appreciate your willingness to share your thoughts with me.

Before we get started, I would like to explain the consent form to you.

- My research study focuses on undergraduate students who are neurodiverse or who have ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) at the University of San Diego.
- The information you share as faculty member will be used to better understand your experiences as a faculty/professor and classroom strategies while working with neurodiverse/ASD undergraduate students.
- Today's interview will be about 90 minutes long. You will also be asked to participate in a 90-minute focus group. In total, the participation time for this study is 3 hours.
- Everything we talk about is confidential. This means that I will use the information from our interview in a report but there will not be any names used, only pseudonyms.
- Additionally, this interview will be digitally recorded for audio only. This helps me remember what was said. The recordings are confidential and will be kept in my office and will not be shared with anyone outside the project.
- Finally, your participation in this interview is voluntary. You may decide to discontinue participation in the interview at any time. If at this time you are not interested in participating in the interview, please feel free to stop before we get started.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. Can you talk about your experience with neurodiverse students at USD?
2. How have you observed neurodiversity or ASD influencing the overall college experience of students?
3. In what ways have you provided support for neurodiverse/ASD students with specific needs in the classroom? And if you have not, what questions do you have about supporting these students?
4. Are you familiar with the resources available through the DLDRC and mental health and

wellness services at USD?

5. Can you share instances where you have offered support to neurodiverse/ASD students in the classroom?
6. Have you encountered any challenges in supporting neurodiverse/ASD students or serving as their mentor?
7. Can you describe positive experiences involving neurodiverse/ASD students that have positively impacted their academic journey?
8. Have you witnessed any misunderstandings or a need for awareness about neurodiversity among classmates, faculty members, staff or yourself?
9. What strategies or accommodations have you observed to be effective in helping neurodiverse/ASD students manage stressors and sensory overload in the classroom?
10. How visible or noticeable do you think the disabilities of neurodiverse/ASD students are to their classmates and professors?
11. Can you discuss specific strategies or accommodations you have observed to be successful for neurodiverse/ASD students during exams or assignments?
12. What challenges have you noticed neurodiverse/ASD students facing in terms of learning and participation in class?
13. Have you encountered any instances where the neurodiversity of students was not fully accommodated in the classroom?
14. Are you aware of any neurodiversity or ASD advocacy clubs on campus or in the community that could provide support to students or faculty allies?
15. How do you perceive neurodiversity or ASD influencing the choice of major or career path for students?
16. Have you observed (or know of) any classes that are more accommodating or aligned with the strengths of neurodiverse/ASD students?
17. Is there anything you would like to add that we did not discuss in this interview?

CONCLUSION:

I really appreciate you taking the time to do this interview and I will use these important insights to share knowledge about classroom approaches to best support undergraduate students with ASD and neurodiversity. If you have any additional questions or concerns, please reach out to me at carinamendoza@sandiego.edu. You can also reach out to my faculty advisor at nydiasanchez@sandiego.edu.

INTERVIEW SCRIPT FOR FOCUS GROUP

Welcome, everyone! My name is Carina Mendoza and I am in my second year in the Masters of Higher Education program here at USD. I would like to thank you for taking the time to participate today. I really appreciate your willingness to share your thoughts with me.

You were given a consent form during your interview describing this focus group.

- As a reminder, my research study focuses on undergraduate students who are neurodiverse or who have ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) at the University of San Diego.
- A focus group is a diverse group of people assembled to participate in guided discussion about a topic.
- The goal of today's focus group is to share your lived experiences as neurodiverse/ASD undergraduate students and faculty allies.
- This focus group will take approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes.
- Everything we talk about is confidential. This means that I will use the information from our conversations in a report but there will not be any name used, only pseudonyms, and no one will know specifically who said what. I also ask you to respect the confidentiality of others to assure that everything that is said in this room stays in this room. This means you should not share other people's comments outside this group. I encourage you to be as honest as possible.
- Although I will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, confidentiality of anything you say cannot be guaranteed.
- Additionally, this focus group will be digitally recorded for audio only. This helps me remember what was said. The recordings are confidential and will be kept in my office and will not be shared with anyone outside the project.
- Finally, your participation in this discussion is voluntary. You may decide to discontinue participation in the discussion at any time. If at this time you are not interested in participating in the interview, please feel free to stop before we get started.

Is it OK with all of you that I start recording the conversation?

FOCUS GROUP RULES:

Now I would like to go over a few group rules to guide our conversation.

- Please talk one at a time and speak up as much as possible. This will make it easier for us to hear each other.
- Please respect one another's opinions. There will be a range of opinions and experiences on any of the topics, and we do not expect everyone to agree with one another. I do, however, ask that everybody show respect when others are talking.
- Because we only have 1 hour and 30 minutes, I may have to shorten the discussion and move on to another question.
- Feel free to respond to each other about these topics, not just answer my questions. This will

help us have a good discussion about each topic.

Are there any other rules we should include to help guide our focus group discussion today?

Before we get started, are there any questions?

FOCUS GROUP OVERVIEW:

As previously mentioned, the goal of today's focus group is to share your lived experiences as neurodiverse/ASD undergraduate students and faculty allies. Your unique perspectives are incredibly valuable, and I'm excited to hear your ideas on how we can improve the classroom experience and foster stronger connections between students and faculty.

I will be asking questions, moderating, and leading the discussions for the time we're together. My hope is to create a comfortable and open environment where participants can freely share their lived experiences as neurodiverse/ASD undergraduate students and faculty.

Our time together here can be summarized as follows:

- First we will have introductions. Please introduce yourself with your chosen pseudonym.
- Then we will go over some ground rules.
- Finally, we will begin our group conversation with prompts for open sharing and discussion.
- I will end our conversation with a few closing remarks.

Alright let's get started.

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS:

1. Can you share an experience where you felt misunderstood because of your neurodiversity?
2. How do you think neurodiversity is perceived within the USD community?
3. What accommodations or support services have been most helpful to you at USD?
4. Are there accommodations or forms of support you need that are not currently available or adequately provided?
5. What kind of training do you think faculty and staff need to better understand and support neurodivergent students?
6. How can we encourage faculty and staff to engage in this training and apply it in their interactions with students?
7. What factors influence your decision to disclose your neurodiversity to faculty or peers?
8. How can the university create an environment that encourages self-advocacy?
9. In what ways has Universal Learning Design (A teaching approach that works to accommodate the needs and abilities of all learners and eliminates unnecessary hurdles in the learning process) been implemented in your classes, and what impact has it had on your learning experience?
10. How can we promote the wider adoption of UDL principles across the university?

11. How has technology helped or hindered your learning experience at USD?
12. What technological tools or resources would you recommend to enhance learning for neurodivergent students?
13. Can you describe a time when you felt particularly included or excluded in the classroom or on campus?
14. What strategies can be employed to foster a more inclusive social environment for neurodivergent students?
15. How does your neurodiversity impact your mental health and overall wellbeing at USD?
16. What mental health resources are most beneficial for neurodivergent students, and what gaps exist in current services?
17. What additional career support or guidance do neurodivergent students need to succeed after graduation?
18. What has been your experience with the Disability and Learning Resource Center or other resource centers dedicated to supporting neurodivergent students?
19. How can these resource centers improve their services and outreach to better meet your needs?
20. In what ways has USD helped you grow personally and academically as a neurodivergent individual?
21. What can the university do to further empower neurodivergent students to embrace their unique strengths?
22. What initiatives or programs would you like to see implemented at USD to better support the neurodivergent community?
23. How can students and faculty collaborate to promote and develop these initiatives?
24. Can you share an experience where you felt particularly supported or unsupported due to your neurodiversity, and what made that situation stand out?
25. How have interactions with faculty and peers influenced your academic experience and sense of belonging at USD?
26. What do you think faculty and peers need to understand most about interacting with neurodivergent students?
27. What accommodations have been most helpful to you, and are there accommodations you wish were available but currently are not?
28. How can the process of requesting and implementing accommodations be improved to better serve neurodivergent students?
29. In what ways have you seen UDL principles successfully implemented in your classes, and how have they impacted your learning?
30. Can you suggest specific teaching strategies or classroom practices that would make learning more accessible for neurodivergent students?
31. What support or resources would make self-advocacy easier or more effective for neurodivergent students?
32. How do you navigate social dynamics in academic settings, and what support systems have you found most valuable?
33. Can you discuss the importance of emotional intelligence in faculty and how it affects your educational experience?
34. What does an inclusive educational environment look like to you, and how can USD move closer to that ideal?

35. How can USD foster a sense of community among neurodivergent students, and what role can neurotypical students play in this effort?
36. How do you think social media discussions about neurodiversity have influenced perceptions on campus?
37. What misconceptions about neurodiversity would you like to address or clarify with the broader USD community?
38. What policy changes would you recommend to the USD administration to better support neurodivergent students?
39. What are your hopes for how neurodiversity will be understood and accommodated in higher education.

CONCLUSION:

Thank you all for being here and sharing your experiences with me today. Your input is super important in helping me understand the experiences and challenges faced by students who are neurodiverse here at USD. Your honest responses will play a vital role in making our campus a more inclusive and supportive place for everyone. In this focus group, we've learned about the positive impact of certain classroom experiences and the support from faculty on the academic journey of neurodiverse students. We've also heard unique student experiences about specific challenges that we need to address to make sure all students have a smooth learning experience. The feedback regarding suggestions to best support students with ASD and neurodiversity is extremely helpful. If you have any feedback or additional questions from today, please reach out to me at carinamendoza@san Diego.edu. You can also reach out to my faculty advisor at nydiasanchez@san Diego.edu.

USD student 1-1 interview script:

INTERVIEW SCRIPT FOR STUDENTS

Hi, my name is Carina Mendoza and I am in my second year in the Masters of Higher Education program here at USD. I would like to thank you for taking the time to participate today. I really appreciate your willingness to share your thoughts with me.

Before we get started, I would like to explain the consent form to you.

- My research study focuses on undergraduate students who are neurodiverse or who have ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) at the University of San Diego.
- The information you share as a student will be used to better understand your experiences and challenges in the classroom.
- Today's interview will be about 90 minutes long. You will also be asked to participate in a 90-minute focus group. In total, the participation time for this study is 3 hours.

- Everything we talk about is confidential. This means that I will use the information from our interview in a report but there will not be any names used, only pseudonyms.
- Additionally, this interview will be digitally recorded for audio only. This helps me remember what was said. The recordings are confidential and will be kept in my office and will not be shared with anyone outside the project.
- Finally, your participation in this interview is voluntary. You may decide to discontinue participation in the interview at any time. If at this time you are not interested in participating in the interview, please feel free to stop before we get started.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. How has your neurodiversity or ASD affected your overall college experience?
2. In what ways has USD provided support for your specific needs as a neurodiverse/ASD student?
3. Are you aware of how to access resources through the DLDRC and mental health and wellness resources at USD?
4. Can you share instances where you felt supported by your professors in the classroom?
5. Have you had any unsupportive professors or mentors?
6. Can you describe any positive experiences involving your professors or classmates that have impacted your academic journey?
7. Have you faced any misunderstanding or need for awareness about your neurodiversity from your classmates or professors?
8. Can you share effective strategies or techniques you've used to manage stressors and sensory overload while in class?
9. Do you think your disabilities are visible or noticeable to your classmates and professors?
10. Can you discuss specific strategies or accommodations you've utilized during exams or assignments that have helped you thrive academically?
11. What challenges have you faced in terms of learning and participation in class as a neurodiverse/ASD student?
12. Can you share any experiences where you felt your neurodiversity was not fully accommodated in the classroom?
13. Are you part of any neurodiversity or ASD advocacy or clubs on campus and in the community?
14. How has your neurodiversity or ASD influenced your choice of major or career path?
15. Are you in any classes that are more accommodating or aligned with your strengths?
16. Can you describe any classroom experiences where you have provided unique perspectives or insights that enriched discussions or projects?
17. Have you had any opportunities or experiences in college that have contributed to your personal and academic growth?
18. What are your thoughts on disclosing your neurodiversity or ASD to professors or

classmates?

19. Can you provide examples of learning strategies that have been helpful to you?
20. Are there any valuable lessons or tips based on your personal experiences as a neurodiverse/ASD undergraduate student?

CONCLUSION:

I really appreciate you taking the time to do this interview and I will use these important insights to share knowledge about classroom approaches to best support undergraduate students with ASD and neurodiversity. If you have any additional questions or concerns, please reach out to me at carinamendoza@sandiego.edu. You can also reach out to my faculty advisor at nydiasanchez@sandiego.edu.

Appendix C

USD Faculty and Student Consent Form

University of San Diego
Institutional Review
Board

Research Participant Adult Consent Form

For the research study entitled:

**“Supporting Students with ASD and Neurodiversity: University of San Diego
Accommodations and Resources”**

I. Purpose of the research study

Carina Mendoza is a graduate student in the School of Leadership Education and Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this study aims to explore the unique classroom experiences and challenges of undergraduate students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at the University of San Diego, and faculty perspectives on creating an inclusive classroom environment.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Participate in an individual interview for 90 minutes in length at an approved USD Student Wellness clinical space, such as the University Counseling Center and the Center for Health and Wellness Promotion. The interview will consist of questions regarding your experiences as a faculty/professor and classroom strategies while working with neurodiverse/ASD undergraduate students.
2. Participate in a focus group that will be 90 minutes in length at an approved USD Student Wellness clinical space, such as the University Counseling Center and the Center for Health and Wellness Promotion. A focus group is a diverse group of people assembled to participate in guided discussion about a topic. The focus group will consist of faculty and students. The focus group will consist of questions regarding your lived experiences as faculty supporting neurodiverse/ASD undergraduate students.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 3 hours. All sessions will be audio recorded.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

a) Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day: San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339

IV. Benefits

Participating in this study won't directly benefit you. However, it will help researchers better understand the classroom experiences and challenges of undergraduate students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)/neurodiversity at USD, along with faculty perspectives on creating an inclusive classroom environment. Your feedback will contribute to supporting inclusivity for all students at USD.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file for a minimum of 5 years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

Although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but the information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may be used in future research.

VI. Compensation

If you participate in the study, the researcher will give you a \$60 gift card personally in person. Food and snacks refreshments will also be provided during the focus group session. You will receive this compensation even if you decide not to complete the entire focus group.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment, or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Carina Mendoza

USD Email:

carinamendoza@san Diego.edu

2) (Nydia Sanchez Faculty Advisor)

USD Email:

nydiasanchez@san Diego.edu

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Signature of Participant & Date: _____

Name of Participant (**Printed**) & Date:

Signature of Investigator & Date:
