Belonging by Design: Growing Neurodiversity-Informed Communities of Practice

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Background

Traditional faculty development approaches to neurodiversity often frame inclusion as a compliance obligation rather than a relational one — relying on one-time workshops, emphasizing technique acquisition over reflective practice, and maintaining hierarchical structures that constrain authentic dialogue. This initiative began from a different premise: **that sustainable inclusion requires sustained community.**

The Neurodiversity Institute (NDI)

Developed through cross-campus collaboration among teaching, learning, and accessibility partners, the two-day NDI aimed to increase awareness and understanding of neurodiversity while equipping over 160 faculty and staff from 30+ departments with tools for inclusive course design through Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and accessibility practices.

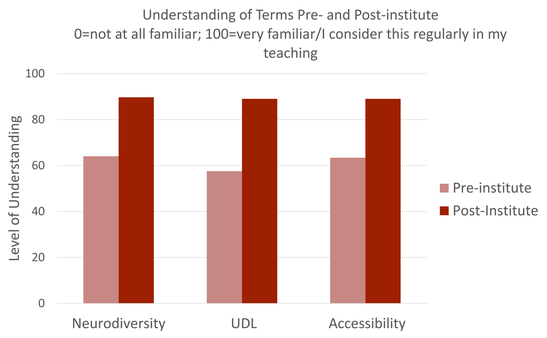
Beyond the Institute: Neurodiversity in Higher Ed Community of Practice

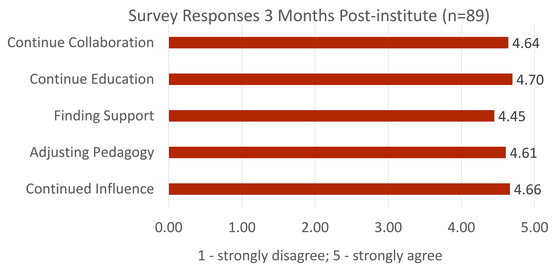
To sustain learning beyond a single event, a follow-up CoP was created — a deliberately small, scholarly, and supportive environment where faculty explore neurodiversity more deeply as both educators and learners, engaging in authentic discussion on topics including accessibility, stigma, masking, and equity in academic contexts.

Program Design

Phase 1: Neurodiversity Institute

- Intensive two-day workshop engaging 160+ faculty and staff across 30+ departments.
- Content focused on Universal Design for Learning, accessibility frameworks, and evidence-based inclusive pedagogy.
- Outcomes included increased confidence in supporting neurodivergent students and identification of need for sustained community.





Phase 2: Community of Practice (AY 2025–26)

- **Format**: Ten 90-minute facilitated discussions
- **Participants**: Ten cross-role faculty and staff spanning multiple departments and institutional levels
- **Texts:** Three curated texts selected to move participants from foundational neurodiversity frameworks toward somatic and racialized dimensions of neurodivergent experience:
  - *Of Many Minds: Neurodiversity and Mental Health Among University Faculty and Staff* (Pope-Ruark & Skallerup Bessette, 2025)
  - *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (van der Kolk, 2014)
  - *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Menakem, 2017)
- **Facilitation:** Co-facilitated by the Director of Inclusive Teaching Practices and the Director of SoTL and Faculty Learning Communities, both with academic backgrounds in psychology — supporting relational safety and informed engagement with complex, identity-centered content

Design Principles

Design Principle	In Practice
Process Over Product	No deliverables; emphasis on reflective practice
Cross-Hierarchical	Intentional inclusion across institutional roles
Sustained Engagement	Academic-year commitment enabling depth
Psychological Safety	Explicit norms supporting vulnerability

Methodology

Mid-year anonymous Qualtrics survey (n=7). Open-ended prompts addressed CoP experience, distinguishing features, structural feedback, and additional observations. Analysis followed Braun & Clarke (2006) thematic analysis: initial coding, pattern identification, theme development, and validation through multiple analyst review.

Findings

Theme 1: Psychological Safety as Enabling Condition

Participants consistently identified the CoP as providing rare institutional space for vulnerability and identity exploration. Psychological safety functioned not as peripheral feature but as foundational condition enabling all learning outcomes.

> *"This is a space where I feel safe being vulnerable and exploring parts of my identity that I never allowed myself to explore."*

> *"There are some things said in this room that I wouldn't hear in another group on campus."*

Theme 2: Cross-Hierarchical Community

The dissolution of typical institutional hierarchies emerged as a distinctive design element. Cross-role participation created conditions for perspective-taking unavailable in role-segregated professional development.

> *"People are coming from different employment levels, from staff, to adjunct faculty, to faculty, to admin... and we still feel safe doing that."*

Theme 3: Enhanced Agency & Advocacy Capacity

Participants reported increased capacity to advocate for themselves and others. Individual empowerment generated interest in systemic impact, suggesting potential for organizational change beyond individual practice.

> *"Feel much more empowered to discuss and advocate for myself and/or others (students, colleagues, unknowns)."*

Theme 4: Productive Tension — Informality & Structure

Participants valued informal design while requesting light structural scaffolding. Optimal design balances safety through informality with coherence through minimal structure.

> *"While we do have a text, I appreciate the general level of informality... it allows people to be seen and think through real solutions."*

Theme 5: Accommodation Complexity

Participants demonstrated sophisticated understanding beyond simplistic solutions, signaling movement toward nuanced disability justice frameworks.

> *"It seems as if the general response is to give people more time, especially faculty, but that also has costs that may outweigh the benefits."*

Theme 6: Legitimation of Internal Transformation

Removal of assessment pressures enabled reflection and identity work typically precluded by outcome-driven professional development.

> *"There is no pressure to produce something for others to measure how effective this program is... it's a change happening internally."*

Discussion: The Productive Paradox

Key Finding

Removing traditional accountability mechanisms (deliverables, assessment) paradoxically generates more meaningful outcomes: reported internal transformation, enhanced advocacy capacity, and sustained voluntary engagement.

This challenges dominant faculty development paradigms emphasizing measurable outputs and suggests value in trusting process over demanding product.

Limitations: Small sample size (n=7) limits generalizability, self-selected participation introduces selection bias, mid-year timing captures evolving rather than complete experience, absence of comparison group prevents causal claims

Next Steps

Program: Add structured closing reflections, participant-driven open sessions, and explicit translation moments for institutional context

Research: End-of-year assessment of full-year arc; artifact collection; comparison of Institute-only vs. Institute + CoP participants; longitudinal study of sustained impact

Implications for Practice

- Design sustained, cross-hierarchical communities for identity-intersecting topics
- Trust internal transformation as legitimate outcome — qualitative change often precedes quantifiable change
- Evaluate whether assessment requirements serve or constrain learning
- Meaningful inclusion requires sustained investment, not episodic interventions



