University of San Diego®
SCHOOL OF LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION SCIENCES
Center for Embodied Equity and Neurodiversity

A Photovoice Project Examining Disabled Students' Experiences in Higher Education

Sylvia Mac, Ph.D. & Niki Elliott, Ph.D.

Literature Review

1. Mental Health of College Students with Disabilities

2. Access to Accommodations

3. Faculty and Staff Attitudes and Competence

Mental Health of College Students with Disabilities

- Students with disabilities now make up 21% of postsecondary students – growth due in part to increase in behavioral or emotional conditions (e.g., depression, ADHD).

(GAO, 2024)

Mental Health of College Students with Disabilities (2)

- Students with disabilities have a significantly higher prevalence of depression, anxiety, non-suicidal injury, and suicidal risk. (1)

  - "Suicide attempt is over three times higher for students with disabilities." (2)

(1. García et al., 2024) (2. Aguilar & Lipson, 2021, p. 281)

Mental Health of College Students with Disabilities (3)

- Ableism is associated with worse mental health for students and young people with disabilities (1) and lower health and wellbeing measures. (2)

(1. Brown & Ciciukaite, 2022; Jóhannsdóttir et al., 2022)
(2. Branco et al., 2019)

Mental Health of College Students with Disabilities (4)

- Aguilar and Lipson (2021) found that "after controlling for the effects of overt and covert discrimination, institutional betrayal significantly predicted a lower academic self-esteem and higher symptoms of depression" (p. 1441).

Access to Accommodations (1)

- Students are often concerned about disclosing their disability because of the perceived stigma and shame attached to disability labels. (1)

- Students worry they will be treated differently, or that they will be perceived as unpredictable, incompetent, or otherwise less than. (2)

(1. Bunbury, 2020; Kendall, 2016; Moriña, 2024) (2. Eccles et al., 2018; Salimi et al., 2025; Waterfield & Whelan, 2017)

Access to Accommodations (2)

- Accommodations not always useful or appropriately applied. (1)

- Many students with disabilities report that the quality and usefulness of the accommodations they receive are not worth the potential negatives of disclosing their disability. (2)

(1. Black et al., 2015; Kendall, 2016) (2. Sapir & Banai, 2024; Shpigelman et al., 2022).

Faculty and Staff Attitudes and Compliance (1)

- Deficit views of students with disabilities. (1)

- Hidden / invisible disabilities

  - Seen as "less deserving" of accommodations than those with physical disabilities. (2)

  - More likely to assume lack of competence. (3)

(1. Bunbury, 2020) (2. Blum et al., 2019) (3. Cole & Cawthon, 2015)

Faculty and Staff Attitudes and Compliance (2)

- Students with disabilities report that faculty and staff are often ignorant or insensitive to their needs. (1)

(Black et al., 2015; Kendall, 2016; Moriña, 2024; Osborne, 2019)

Theoretical Framework

- Polyvagal theory, or "science of safety" (1)

  - processes of the mind, the brain, and the body are directly impacted by perceptions of safety in one's immediate environment

  - link between the high functioning of the *vagus nerve* with an individual's ability to learn and perform intellectually, engage in social bonding, and heal the body's internal systems (2)

(1. Porges, 2011) (2. Kolacz et al., 2019)

Theoretical Framework (1)

- Felt safety is crucial for positive social engagement

  - Physical safety + psychological safety

  - Johnson et al. (2020) define psychological safety as "a shared belief that the [educator-learner relationship] is safe for interpersonal risk taking which creates a sense of confidence that [the educator] will not embarrass, reject or punish [the learner]…due to mutual respect and trust" (p. 560).
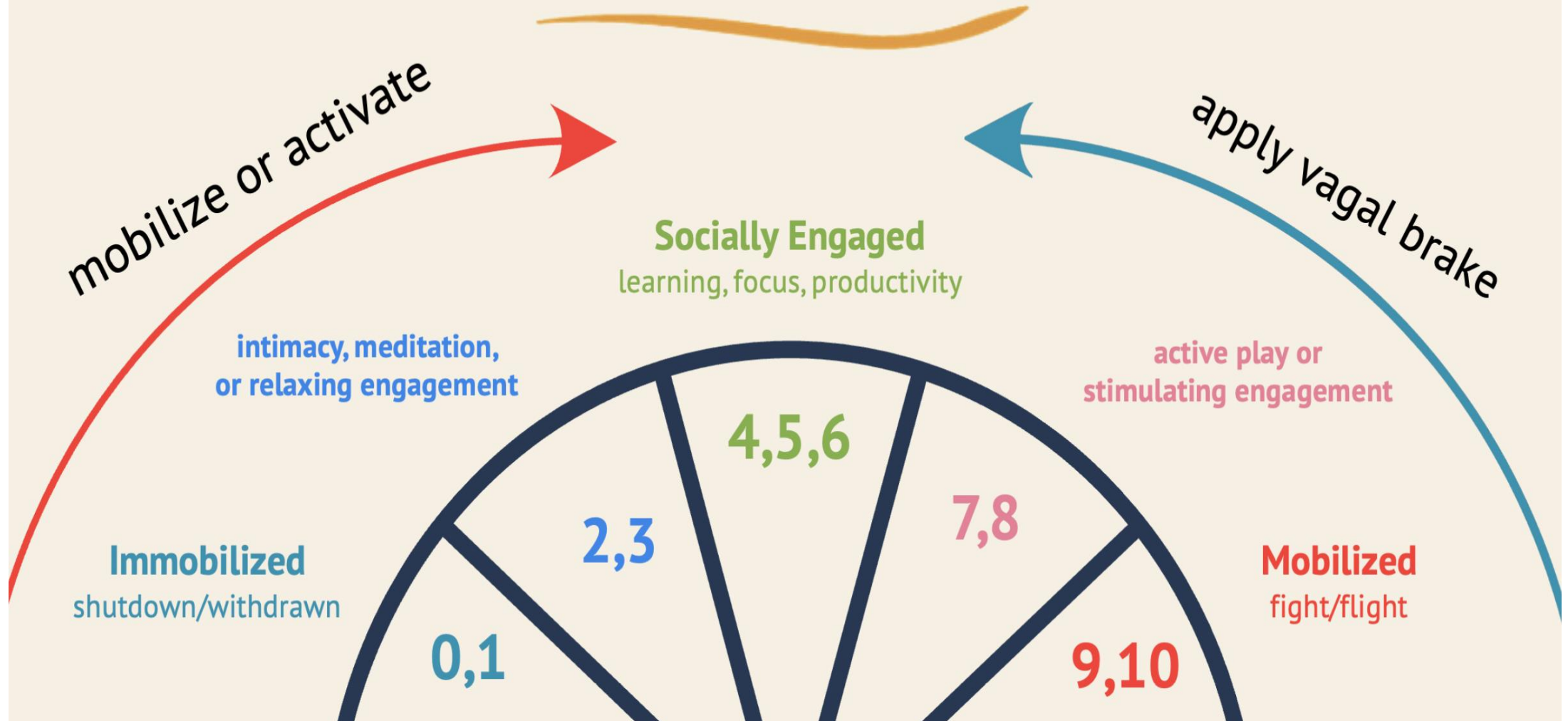
Theoretical Framework (2)

- The autonomic nervous system needs to fulfill three requirements to down-regulate the threat response:

  - Accurately perceive direct threats to physical and psychological safety

  - Experience intentional cues of welcome and belonging from others

  - Assess safety through the sensory and physical features of the environment.

Theoretical Framework (3)

- Need to understand students' with disabilities sense of safety and belonging to better understand retention rates and other metrics – how can we actively cue safety and belonging to all students?

Methodology (1)

- Photovoice (1)

  - collaborative in nature and utilizes photos taken by participants to engage with stakeholders and to stimulate dialogue for policy change by "highlight[ing] the experiences and perspectives of those who have been marginalized, those with voices not ordinarily heard by those in positions of power." (2)

Methodology (2)

- Photovoice (1)

    - 3 goals: "(1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important community issues through large and small group discussion of photographs, and (3) to reach policy makers" (1 p. 370)

Methodology (3)

- Photovoice has been used with people with disabilities in health and community research (1) while Agarwal et al. (2015) used photovoice with 6 students with disabilities in higher education.

(1. Booth & Booth, 2003; Brake et al., 2012; Hunt et al., 2020; Jurkowski & Paul-Ward, 2007; Povee et al., 2014; Shamrock et al., 2017; Williamson et al., 2019)

Participant (Pseudonyms)	Disability Label
Alice, undergraduate student	Dyslexia, ADHD
Sarah, undergraduate student	Physical disability
Kristen, graduate student	Dyslexia
Allison, undergraduate student	Epilepsy
Elizabeth, graduate student	Dyslexia
Jamie, graduate student	Physical disability

Methodology (4)

Small, private university in Southern California

Weekly prompts were derived from Porges' polyvagal theory (2011) of the conditions that need to be met for positive social engagement to occur:

- Am I safe?
- Do you like me?
- Am I good enough to be here?

- The final prompt urged participants to imagine their ideal / dream college environment aimed at promoting change at the University.

Methodology (5)

- Thematic analysis (1)

- Coding was "theory-driven" (1) in which the researchers "approach[ed] the data with specific questions in mind that [they] wish[ed] to code around" (p. 89). Coding was driven by Porges' polyvagal theory (2011) and was centered around safety, belonging, and being liked.

- Public Exhibition
    - Lecture to University
    - Photos in University Art Gallery

(1. Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Findings

1. Perceptions of Felt Safety

2. Perceptions of Belonging

3. Perceptions of Being Liked

Perceptions of Felt Safety - Jamie

Student's hand with words written in permanent marker on the palm

"That is how some people see me and have actually called me those."

"All of that is what I'm dealing with while trying to hide those so I don't get seen as attention-seeker, pill-popper, that kind of thing."

"It [physical safety] also plays into the emotional safety because if I'm worried about my physical safety, my anxiety is extremely high because I'm not physically safe."

Perceptions of Felt Safety – Sarah (1)

- "I think I'm going to die my first semester, because they don't have any accessibility for me."

- "I didn't understand why it was taking that long. And I was really thinking, I'm like, 'We're going to burn. If this was a real fire and you were doing this, we would've been burnt already. It would've been crispy.'"

Perceptions of Felt Safety – Sarah (2)

- "The first thing that comes to my mind is like, they forgot about us. They thought that we could just live in this building with no type of accessibilities at all. They just thought, "Oh, there's an elevator. That's good enough" when it's like, okay, well, when we have those fire alarms and stuff, the elevators aren't to be used, are they just going to let us burn? It doesn't make any sense."

Perceptions of Felt Safety - Elizabeth

Water feature with brick backwall and pool of water in front.

- "Being a SPED kid, I know going through elementary school, all the hardships, it can feel like you're drowning in a classroom when kids get it and you don't, and you just feel like there's this shutdown…so that's been my experience probably since second grade…I always took it like that being held back in second grade, I was less than everyone else because I was held back. And so I thought that something was wrong with me."

Perceptions of Felt Safety - Kristen

- "Even when I was a kid, people didn't want to talk to me because they thought I was not as smart as them. So I lost a ton of friends when I went into special ed because they thought I was stupid. So I think there's a little bit of layers there from elementary school where it brings up."

- "It's always been the classroom where I have felt unsafe…Sometimes if it's too fast, and I feel unsafe…when I'm not acknowledged I feel unsafe."

Perceptions of Belonging – Elizabeth (1)

"Sometimes, maybe you don't feel like you belong, but if you act like you belong, it can make it easier for yourself. And you fake it till you make it. So if I am put together and I have my supplies and I'm organized, not that I always am, but if I get to that level of having my things taken care of, I can feel like I at least look like I know what I'm doing…Yeah. Just to look organized, to look like you're just one of the other great students in the classroom."

Perceptions of Belonging – Elizabeth (2)

"I want to make sure that I'm contributing. I don't want to be dead weight. And sometimes the more I ask questions, the more I feel like dead weight, and it frustrates me because I'm not a dead weight person; it's just school isn't my zone."

School supplies, including mini stapler, colored sticky tabs, index cards, paperclips, and pens laid out neatly in a row.
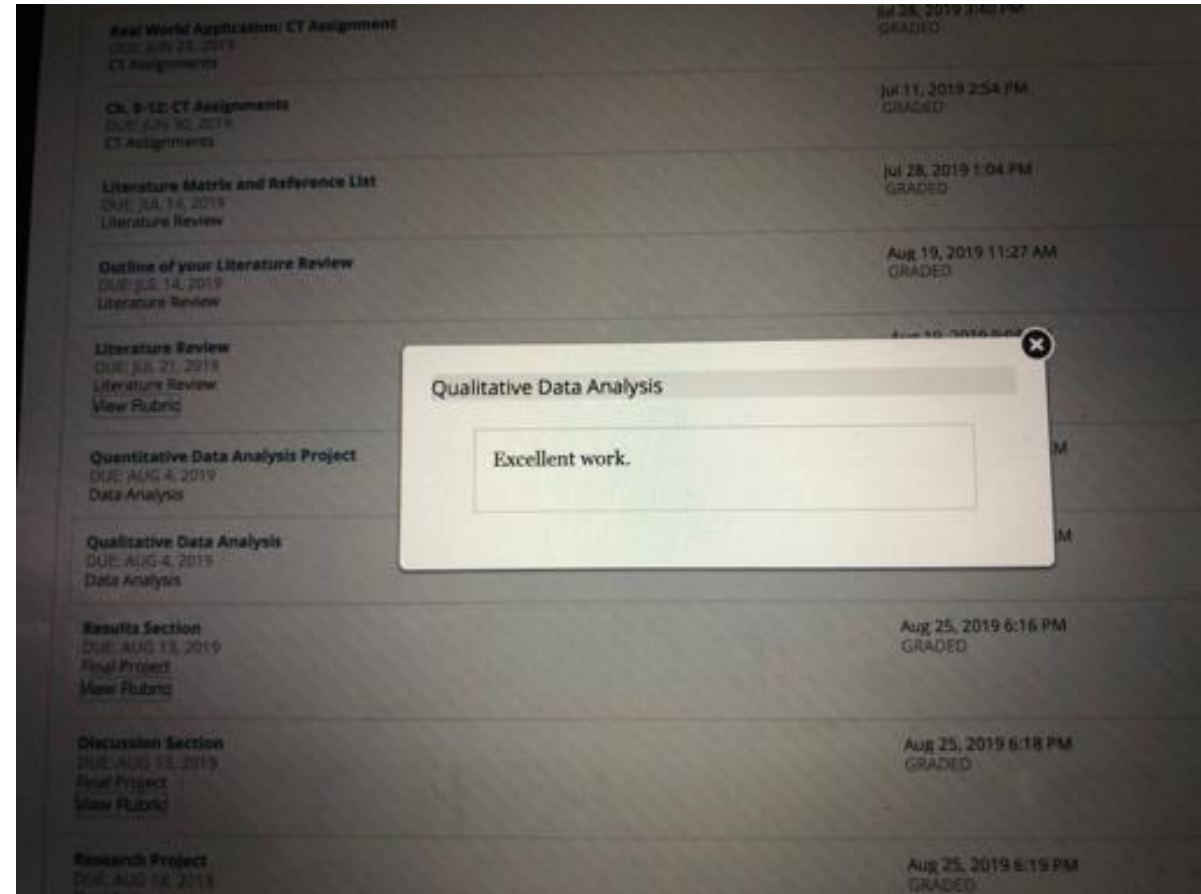
Perceptions of Belonging – Kristen (1)

"[Professor] said that in order to be asked…, you have to be high performing in your classes and you have to really understand the material."

"I felt accepted because they used me to be a panelist and share my experiences as a neurodivergent learner…And then it's really nice that they wanted to gain insight from an actual neurodivergent learner because sometimes, they don't want our input. They just want to fix us."

Perceptions of Belonging – Kristen (2)

Screenshot of an assignment titled "Qualitative Data Analysis" with instructor comment of "Excellent work."

Perceptions of Belonging - Sarah

- "I got a lot of slick comments about that. Like, "Oh, you got a scholarship because you've been sick since you were a kid," and stuff like that…I think about if people really do see me being here because I actually have something to give, or is it because, "Oh, she has a walker or stuff like that, and she's trying to go to school. So let's just give her a scholarship just because," or whatever."

Perceptions of Being Liked - Alice

"Nobody really wants to group up with somebody my age, and I remember even when I was in my multiculturalism class, they're like, 'You don't need to come to the group.'"

Glass phonebooth with flyers taped up on the wall of the phone booth.

Perceptions of Being Liked – Alice and Elizabeth

- "I'm able to meet with her all the time. I meet with her to go over my homework. She's just so nice. I'm really grateful for her." [Alice]

- "Giving me the attention I need through email or phone call, so I can ask for clarification on assignments. Sometimes I need more time or just looking over my work before I submit is helpful. So then I feel more confident in the work that I'm submitting." [Elizabeth]

Perceptions of Being Liked - Allison
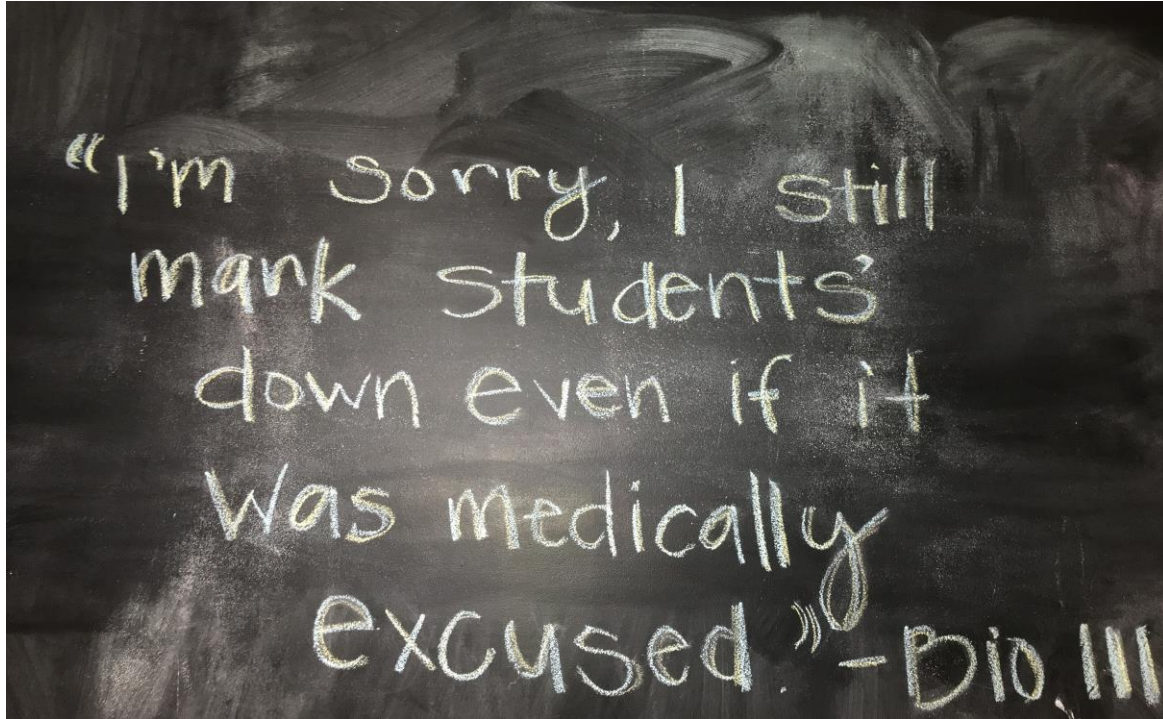
White chalk writing on a blackboard.

"I'm sorry, I still mark my students down even though it was medically excused."

Discussion

- Physiological cost when students do not experience intentional cues of safety and belonging

  - When, in the absence of safety and belonging, students perceive threats in the educational environment, the neocortex (the part of the brain responsible higher-level cognitive function) is not able to function efficiently. (1)

(1. Butler, 2024)

Discussion

- Physiological cost when students do not experience intentional cues of safety and belonging

  - The lack of safety and belonging exacerbates these students' anxiety, leading to lower executive functioning and potentially fulfilling prophecy that they are not "smart enough."

Discussion

- Experiences of chronic threat narrow a person's window of social accessibility – the ability to bond, trust, and engage the higher thinking centers of the brain. (1)

- For Elizabeth, Kristen, and Alice, when their instructors did not intentionally cue safety, the physical symptoms of their disabilities were compounded as they were in a state of sympathetic mobilization, resulting in the inaccessibility of the higher order thinking parts of the brain

(Porges, 2021)

Discussion

- Elizabeth and Kristen, who both may be more sensitive to cues of safety and connection because of their long history of social rejection and exclusion in educational environments, recounted signs of mobilized survival responses in which they sought to overperform so that they could feel they measured up to those around them. Elizabeth submitting a picture of perfectly laid out school supplies and Kristen submitted a screenshot of a perfect score on an assignment.

Discussion

These defense strategies were ways for them to protect themselves from potential harm by signaling that they are excellent students who deserve to be included and valued.

Discussion

- When Elizabeth and Alice felt their instructors cared for them and did not dismiss them because they needed extra help, they reported feeling open to submitting their work for feedback and critique, rather than needing to signal perfection. Because their instructors indicated care and concern, Elizabeth and Alice were able to receive critique and to ultimately, do their best work.

Discussion

- Being in ventral vagal states, where students felt safe both physically and psychologically, allowed students to be physiologically primed for social engagement and learning, rather than reacting to real or perceived threats.

Goals	Example	Suggestions
To have institutions recognize that even their best efforts to be inclusive may be causing harm because they are not sensitive to the ways in which the environment, instructor, or peers inadvertently trigger fight / flight / freeze / appease responses in students who have a history of negative experiences as historically marginalized individuals	Elizabeth: school supplies Alice: group project	- Find opportunities to validate unique strengths and genius. - Model ways for students to give meaningful, positive feedback to their peers that demonstrate they are valued. - Have options for how students work: individually, in pairs, or in groups.

Goals	Example	Suggestions
To have institutions recognize that even their best efforts to be inclusive may be causing harm because they are not sensitive to the ways in which the environment, instructor, or peers inadvertently trigger fight / flight / freeze / appease responses in students who have a history of negative experiences as historically marginalized individuals	Elizabeth: school supplies Alice: group project	- When assigning group work, establish clear guidelines and expectations for how they will work together. Provide frequent check-ins to ensure any issues can be remedied quickly. - Make a proactive statement to the class that acknowledges the instructor's willingness to support students with disabilities when working with groups

Goals	Example	Suggestions
To address the potential for faulty neuroception, or the misreading of current perceptions of safety, in students who have a history of trauma as a result of their disability label, such that they are able to accurately assess whether or not a given situation actually presents a threat, or merely resembles a threat from the past	Kristen: on panel	- Find opportunities to provide mentorship to students that confirm to them that their intelligence and neurodiversity is valued. - Provide scaffolding to support students in leadership opportunities, allowing them to experience success to combat faulty neuroception.

Goals	Example	Suggestions
To grow resiliency in these students, such that they are able to function optimally, even in environments that may cause harm while those spaces continue to be challenged to develop more comprehensive systems of care and belonging	Sarah: chair and push button Allison: absence policy	- Consider photovoice or other avenues for inviting students' voices that ensure they have a seat at the table. - Support students as allies in their advocacy efforts so that they are not approaching administrators alone, or positioning themselves as oppositional and/or confrontational students.

Goals	Example	Suggestions
To grow resiliency in these students, such that they are able to function optimally, even in environments that may cause harm while those spaces continue to be challenged to develop more comprehensive systems of care and belonging	Sarah: chair and push button Allison: absence policy	- Keep in mind that as disability diagnoses continue to rise, more students will likely need to miss class for doctor's appointments, sickness, etc. - Consider how even though instructors may be providing a student's accommodations as required, there may still be course policies or practices that penalize students.

Limitations

- Sample size, composition

- Student schedules + long duration of study

Thank you!

Niki Elliott, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Center for Embodied Equity and Neurodiversity

nelliott@sandiego.edu

Sylvia Mac, Ph.D.

Associate Director, Center for Embodied Equity and Neurodiversity

smac@sandiego.edu