

Building Belonging Together: Advancing Disability Inclusion Across Campus

AHEAD 2026 | Session 2.11 | Carey Eigen, M.Ed. & Dr. Ruth Fries
Academic & Leadership Development | University of Northwestern – St. Paul

Our Approach

Disability Resource providers are uniquely positioned to build bridges across campus. Along with serving students directly, they also have a role in equipping every campus community member to increase student belonging with confidence and care.

Over the 2025–2026 academic year, we partnered with six campus departments to deliver tailored disability awareness and training sessions. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, each session was customized for that specific audience using their language, focusing on their environment, and centering the ways disability most commonly presents in their space.

Campus Partners — 2025–2026

- Faculty
- Student Leaders
- Event Services
- Student Experience Staff
- Subject Tutors & Academic Coaches
- Catering Staff

The Discussion Handout

Each session used a one-page facilitated discussion handout. The format was consistent across all six departments; only the audience, session title, and context column header changed. The handout

- provided meaningful definitions for nine primary disability categories
- named the specific campus context in the column header (e.g., “Ways it may present in tutoring & coaching”)
- left two columns intentionally blank for participants to complete together in the session, identifying how disability might present in their space and what inclusive strategies they could apply
- served as both a structured discussion tool and a take-home reference

An example handout is shown on the following page. →

Empowering Faculty, Empowering Students:

Inclusive Teaching in Action

Audience: Faculty & Instructors | Fall Faculty Workshop 2025

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EXAMPLE HANDOUT

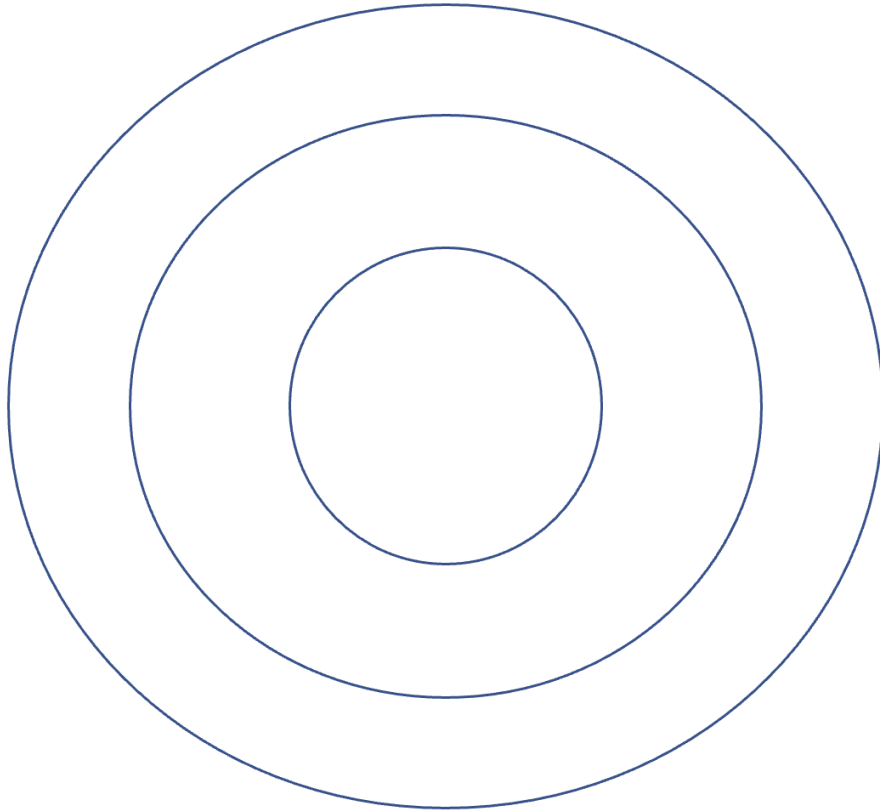
Participant Activity: The shaded columns were completed collaboratively during each session. This format was used across all six campus partner sessions — only the audience and context column header changed.

Disability / Diagnosis	Definition	Ways it may present in the classroom	Strategies
Anxiety	A mental health condition characterized by persistent and excessive worry about a variety of everyday events or activities, which is often out of proportion to the actual likelihood of impact. This worry can significantly interfere with activities of daily living.		
Attention Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder (ADD/ADHD)	A brain disorder marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity/impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development. Not a shortage of attention — but paying too much attention to everything. Not lazy or lack of effort — but wired to the pressure of urgency.		
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	A neurodevelopmental disability characterized by deficits in social interaction and communication, and by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behavior. Symptoms fall on a continuum, with some individuals showing mild symptoms and others having more significant support needs.	<p>Classroom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logical, detail-oriented • Interest based attention • Comfort with an appreciation for rules and guidelines • Social communication and interaction impairments • Restricted or repetitive behaviors • Sensory sensitivities • Discrepancy between their intentions and other's perceptions • Rigidity around routines/rules - low tolerance for unexpected changes or unclear expectations <p>Student Experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferences for routines • Strong interest in specific hobbies or topics • Difficulty with sudden changes (like fire drills or roommate switches) • Sensory overload in dining hall or noisy events • Challenges with social cues, social interactions • Disconnect between intentions and perceptions <p>Tutors</p>	<p>Classroom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-on-one is often more comfortable than group work • Preferred communication style • Single point of contact (maybe advisor for question) • Be mindful of sensory distress, distraction, overload • Articulate the “why” of an assignment/project • Be proactive in reaching out <p>Student Experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide clear schedules and expectations for events • Single point of contact (maybe RD for questions) • Be mindful of sensory distress, distraction, overload – create sensory-friendly spaces • Respect preferred communication style (written vs. Verbal) • Articulate the “why” behind policies • Be proactive in reaching out and connecting • Offer one-on-one conversations <p>Tutors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use clear, direct communication

Disability / Diagnosis	Definition	Ways it may present in the classroom	Strategies
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferences for clear rules and expectations • May focus deeply on specific interests • May prefer written over verbal communication • Difficulty with social cues or small talk • Sensitivity to noise, lights, or crowded study spaces • Their intentions may not match with perceptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the “why” behind tasks or strategies • Allow extra processing time before expecting a response • Provide consistency in meeting location and session flow • Small groups may feel more comfortable than large groups
Depression	A mental health condition characterized by a persistent and pervasive feeling of sadness, loss of interest, and reduced functioning. Can include sleep disturbances, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.		
Learning Disabilities	A general term referring to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in listening, spelling, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical ability. Dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia are examples of specific learning disabilities.		
Physical/Sensory Disabilities	Includes deafness, visual impairment, and/or limited mobility. Auxiliary services such as sign language interpreting, barrier-free access to buildings, and assistive technology serve as means to create equity and access.		
Psychological/Psychiatric Disabilities	Refers to a range of syndromes and conditions characterized by different types and degrees of emotional, developmental, cognitive, and/or behavioral manifestations. Examples include OCD, bipolar disorder, generalized anxiety, mood disorders, and PTSD.		
Traumatic Brain Injury / Post-Concussive Syndrome	Occurs when an external mechanical force causes brain dysfunction. TBI may have mild to profound effects on physical, psychological, emotional, and/or social functioning.		
Chronic Health Conditions	Conditions that impact a major life activity, such as cancer, POTS, autoimmune disease, diabetes, or lupus. Medical documentation must substantiate how the condition impacts a major life activity.		

Spheres of Influence: Campus Allies

- Map your institution's potential collaboration entry points
- Work out from there – who in the inner circle can connect you with another department, student group, etc.
- Anticipate resistance



Action Item: What is one idea you can take back to your campus?