

Transcript for Session 3: Advancing Neuroinclusivity in Post-Secondary Education: Evidence, Initiatives, and Pathways Forward
Supporting Neurodiversity in Post-Secondary Education Series
BCcampus webinar hosted on February 11, 2025

Panelists: Dr. Jennifer Fane, Dr. Megan Ames, Dr. Elina Birmingham, Dr. Grace Iarocci, Alison Hale, Kathy Moscrip
Host: Helena Prins
ASL Interpreting team: Bree Quan and Debbie Miyashita

HELENA PRINS:

Good morning, everyone, and welcome. We are so excited to have you with us today. First, I just want to welcome and express my appreciation for our ASL interpreters. And we have Bree Quan and Debbie Miyashita. Thank you so much for being with us. And we are recording the session, and the recording will be shared afterwards publicly. And here to help with all these techniques for today is my team member Kelsey Kilbey. Thank you so much Kelsey. She will also provide a survey link now and maybe later as well for you to complete at the end of the session today. Thank you. Another teammate that's here with me today is Britt Dzioba. Together, we have really enjoyed planning this month of neurodiversity learning events. And as Britt said yesterday during the student panel, or last week, during the student panel, excuse me. She said that the high interest in the series really gave us some energy, and that is so true. So thank you, everyone for being interested in this important topic. If you've missed that student panel, I highly recommend you watch the recording. The recording is available, and we'll put a link for you in the chat shortly. We had three student panelists who shared about their lived experience and how they navigate their academic journey. And it was really a wonderful gathering. And then yesterday, we had Dr. Shendah Benoit. She guided us through a very practical session on compassionate planning and how we can be intentional using the UDL framework. It was really great to be there as well. And then later this week, we have the very well-known educator, Sarah Silverman, who will be facilitating a two-part workshop and design. And it's not too late for you to join for that one. But you are here today to join us for our panel on Advancing Neuroinclusivity in Post-Secondary Education: Evidence, Initiatives, and Pathways Forward. So before I introduce you to our wonderful panelist, panelists, I would like to take just a moment to honour the First Peoples here. So next slide.

I've zoomed in today from the unceded traditional territories of the Lekwungen People, which includes the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations. With my team, I'm really committed to continue to learn more about decolonizing practices and to do work towards reconciliation. So one way I'm learning more about my own role and responsibility in this work is through reading the works of Indigenous authors. Today, I wanted to share some words from the late Richard Wagamese. It's from this book, and he writes in "What Comes from Spirit" the following: "We all have stories within us. Sometimes we hold them gingerly, sometimes desperately, sometimes as gently as an infant. It's only by sharing our stories, by being strong enough to take a risk, both in the telling and in the asking, that we make it possible to know, recognize, and

understand each other." So I believe that stories come in many different forms. And today stories will be shared in the form of research results and presentations on programs within the post-secondary sector. It is really my hope that by sharing all these stories today, we will all move towards a place of deeper understanding of our students who are neurodivergent, and then that we'll leave today with ideas how we can respond to this deeper understanding. So let's dive in. Next slide.

We'll look at the agenda there. For the next 80 minutes, each presenter will do a short 10-minute presentation, and then we'll give them a 5-minute Q&A time. So you can post your questions in the chat. Maybe you want to not press submit yet until you get to that Q&A time. But you will also be invited to answer questions by unmuting yourself. And then after everyone has presented, and everyone had an individual Q&A. We'll open the floor for broad Q&A and also discussion or comments. We do realize that people in the audience have lots of experience and perhaps also lived experience that they can share with us. Setting the stage for us today is Dr. Jennifer Fane. She's the lead research associate in the education and skills knowledge area at the Conference Board of Canada, specializing in neurodiversity and inclusion. And I want to thank you, Jennifer, for kicking us off. I'll introduce each panelist as they come up. So for now, I'm handing the session over to you.

JENNIFER FANE:

Wonderful. Thank you, Helena, for that wonderful welcome and starting us off in a good way. I am with the Conference Board of Canada, which is a national not-for-profit bipartisan research organization. I am, however, B.C. based. I am on the unceded territory of the Qayqayt Nation that you might also know as New Westminster. And I'm really looking forward to sharing a little bit about the work that I've been doing in this area the past year. Oh, there we go.

So I do want to say that I'm going to be trying to share some key findings from a very large national research study in about 10 minutes. So and not too fast cause that does not help our wonderful ASL interpreters. So I did just want to highlight that all of the data and information I'm sharing with you is publicly available via the Conference Board website. If you're interested in the quantitative national survey data, that's going to be in the middle report that called "Making the Invisible Visible." If you're looking for the full research report at the end, that's called "Creating Inclusive Campuses." I can link these. We also created a resource for students, neurodivergent high school students and their families who are transitioning to post-secondary written and plain language. So we have a multitude of research publications and resources to share if people find them useful. So please feel free to connect with me if you would like help finding any of these resources.

So just to give you a brief context about the research study I ran from January 2024 to December 2024. So last year, and it was a mixed-methods approach. So it included an online survey, which reached 400 neurodivergent students across 12 Canadian provinces, and semi-structured interviews with neurodivergent students and recent graduates as well as accessibility staff and leadership in Canadian public post-secondary institutions. In total 478

individuals were engaged in this research, 445 are neurodivergent students and recent graduates themselves. I'm going to be sharing findings that mix together both the quant and the qual data in here. But again, I'm happy to point you in the right direction if you're curious about specific points afterwards.

So the genesis for this research was really, we know that more and more neurodivergent students are making it into post-secondary, which is fantastic. And we know this is largely due to better diagnoses, better supports, and more inclusive pathways in the K–12 system. However, what this research, where it started was that we don't really know what the profile of neurodivergent learners looks like in higher education. And if we don't really know what neurodivergent learners are looking like and what their experiences are, then it's really hard for us to be supporting that and really enhancing the neuroinclusivity of post-secondary education. So this research is an attempt at sort of a first national representative sample of neurodivergent learners in Canadian higher education. And I'm going to pull out some key findings that are relevant for the audience here. So who are our neurodivergent learners in Canadian higher? This is an infographic that is going to share just some really captures some key information. So the first big finding was that almost 60% of neurodivergent learners identified ADHD, so attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, as part or whole of their neurodivergent identity. And that will be quite important when we talk a little bit to supports and executive function challenges as well. So we have a very large percentage of our neurodivergent learners who are likely going to have quite a few challenges in relation to the pace of learning and other types of accessibility challenges here at post-secondary. Another key finding was that 38% have multiple neurodivergent identities or diagnosis. You'll notice I use identities and diagnoses together just to allow for the range of ways in which people interact with their neurodivergent identity and diagnoses. 33% of neurodivergent learners do not have a formal diagnosis. And of course, some individuals choose not to go through formal diagnosis. I absolutely want to uphold that self-diagnosis is valid, and participants in this research both were self-identified or had clinical diagnosis. However, we do know that without that formal diagnosis, the ability to get support in post-secondary or access accommodations is very, very limited. So that is quite a sticking point for a third of the population. Almost half, 46% report a mental health disorder. Now, I will clarify here that the students that participated. We use the largest umbrella term for neurodiversity that we could or neurodivergence that we could. So the students here do include individuals with developmental disabilities or identity such as autistic, has autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, DCD. But it also does capture individuals for whom mental health challenges preferred them to identify as neurodivergence. That might be lifetime struggles with anxiety, depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, and other serious psychiatric disorders as well that made up this sample. 62% have additional intersectional identities, that might mean that they are international students. They are Indigenous Canadians. They are Canadian equity-seeking individuals from a number of groups, including the LGTBQA+ community, and other areas of intersectionality. And the last piece, the very bottom here that I want to highlight is that only 43% are disclosing their neurodivergent identity or diagnosis to their institution. So less than half of students are actually putting their hand up and informing their institution that they are neurodivergent, and perhaps might benefit or would benefit from accommodations or

supports for their journey. So really the post-secondary system in Canada is really only aware of less than half of the learners who are neurodivergent that are attending their institutions.

So I do want to jump into disclosure because I think it's a really important piece to entangle a little. So if only half of students or over half or choosing not to disclose, why? Why not? Why or why not? So I know the graph is hard to read, but the big bar at the top says, "I didn't disclose because I don't require supports accommodations." And that intuitively makes sense. Why disclose if you do not need to access accommodation? However, when we dig a little deeper into the data, 73% of those who did not disclose identified at least one barrier to disclosure, and those barriers are stigma. That's the second bar. The third red circle says, "I have fear or anxiety about the disclosure process." And the bottom red circle says, "I'm waiting to see if I require accommodations." So you may have students say, "Well, I don't think I need them. That idea that wait and see approach, like, I hope I'll be okay or that there's too many barriers. I don't know the process. It's highly stigmatized." Those are really stopping neurodivergent students from coming to identify their whole selves and being able to sort of access the supports that they need. And why disclosure is important, or why I'll argue here that increasing accessible and inclusive pathways to non-stigmatized disclosure. I should very carefully say that is important because disclosure was correlated with satisfaction for this sample. So students who disclosed, that's the dark blue bar on the left side, were much more likely to be very satisfied. Or relatively very satisfied. Students who did not disclose, again, are less likely to be very satisfied and more likely to be very dissatisfied. This is likely due to the fact that they were not able to navigate the system with the supports or accommodations that they needed. On the right, you can see that I've broken this down by diagnosis category, and I know it's a little tricky to read. But this is mental health only at the very top. They are the most satisfied in terms of any neurodivergent student, and this might be because mental health awareness and mental health support. There's a lot more awareness of the importance of mental health supports for all post-secondary students. We know this is a very challenging time for this population. However, when we look at other groups such as this is autism only, the next bar, single other identity diagnosis that might be DCD or learning disability. And ADHD only down here, they're less satisfied. And at the very bottom, we see multiple identities and diagnoses that has the least level of very satisfied. So those are students that likely have the most complex learning profiles and may have the most complex needs. So we can see here that disclosure is likely to be a highly protective factor and supportive of students, but there's a lot of barriers to that process.

And here we are. So barriers to participation. So in the survey, there was an open-ended question. I'll read it here on the right. It says, "In a few words, what are the biggest barriers or challenges you faced as a neurodivergent student in post-secondary?" And these responses are coded thematically. The number one response was around executive function challenges. So executive function are sort of those soft skills that allow us to learn the material that's being presented. And they're around motivation, planning, organization, working memory, and ability to sort of regulate and attend to learning. So responses like these were, you know, due dates, deadlines, the pace of learning, note taking, remembering what my lecturer told me. Really

those skills that students need to be successful at post-secondary. And why the barrier is quite significant is because in K–12 in high school, the load is lower and the pace of learning is lower. So you might have students that were excelling in high school, and now they get to post-secondary, and their executive function skills are weak compared to their academic skills, and they really start to fall down. Other challenges were pace of learning, social communication and group work, accessing diagnosis or documentation, mental health, discrimination, attendance requirements, nothing. There absolutely were students that said none, which was fantastic to hear. Pedagogy, so the way that teachers and instructors enacted their practices within the classroom, and then finances. Now, I just want to highlight that we asked this question as well without the neurodivergence piece at the beginning of the survey, and we said, What are your biggest barriers? Finances was number two. But when we're asked as a neurodivergent student, finances fall to the very bottom. And here we can see there's a load on neurodivergent students that is not likely on the general population in the challenges. And additional barriers were really a lack of information about courses or programs. Often syllabuses and syllabi are not available right until the day when students show up in classrooms, which makes it really different for neurodivergent student to know if the assessment framework The way that the course has been developed and what they're expected to do is going to work with what they know about themselves and what they need to be successful learners. A lack of flexibility around systems and timelines. Again, having a drop date maybe two weeks into the course after you were maybe on the waitlist and just got in and you're just started, and drop and withdrawal date is being really close together. Again, that's particularly challenging for a population with executive function challenges who might be running a little bit behind already trying to catch up. And the built environment was another key concern, lack of safe spaces, spaces that allow students to regulate and either and feel like they can be in and that they belong in, as well as classroom design challenges. We can go from lighting to seating to sound, and then the location and connectedness of services. How do students actually move about in campus life? I know I'm moving quickly, everyone, but there's just so much rich data came from this study. So those are barriers.

Let's talk about impactful supports. So there are many, many impactful supports that students identified, and very excited for this panel, which actually is going to elaborate on many of these impactful supports. But the big ones that students and staff reported were mental health services. I'll caution here that's from a neuro-affirming approaches to mental health services, Executive function skill development, that could be ADHD coaching, skills coaching, study skills, social groups, again, neuro-affirming social groups that are inclusive, mentorship, pure mentorship, assistive technology, and AI, as well, too. However, if you look at the right, are students accessing these supports, and actually only about a third of the students sampled are accessing supports for neurodivergent students. So there is a gap here in between, like, new offerings that are evidence based that are coming up and students' willingness or knowledge about access and how to access them or why they would be beneficial for them.

But when asked, what would be the most of interest, what types of services? I'll just read these because I think it's small, but transition to workforce, experiential learning preparation, peer

mentorship, sensory refuge, social clubs and activities, academic drop in, counselling services, specialized tutoring or transition to post-secondary. These were options we gave to students to ask, would you be willing? It was, yes, maybe, or no were the answers. 60% said counselling services. So this is a long bar out here. This is by far the most desired services. And again, that's free, easy to access, you know, neuro-affirming, you know, all those pieces. The other interesting thing about this graph, I think it's around looking at the different types of diagnosis or identities. Say for our autism only sample, transition to workforce, and where the other one here, specialized tutoring rate much higher in sensory refuge as well than for say, mental health only students. For mental health only, you can imagine counselling services was very popular; however, sensory refuge is much lower. So here we're drilling down sort of into the different identities or diagnoses. I think it's helpful in imagining a full site of resources or supports that would meet the diversity of neurodivergent learners. I don't have a graph in here. I had to cut down my slides quite significantly, but again, the co-occurrence for many students of multiple identities or diagnoses happening at the same time really does layer on additional challenges. So for our students with multiple diagnoses, they need quite different supports than a student with a single identity or diagnosis.

And the last key area that I wanted to touch on before I stop is just talking about institutional policy. So again, a lot of the information I've talked about is around the student profile and how we can perhaps better serve students in post-secondary. But another key finding of this research is that institutions also need better guidance and support for how to really address accessibility within the institution. And that has been quite challenging for a lot of institutions. So I asked how institutions were doing and whether they felt that neurodiversity was adequately considered in their institutions, EDI policies, which is topical now today, especially as it was, you know, earlier last year when we were talking about EDI. So, interesting, polytechnic staff were the least likely to say that it was included. Polytechnic leadership was a little less likely. College staff felt that yes, it was included. And again, colleges seem to be... College staff reported that it was. Universities were actually really interesting. I was completely evenly split between yes, adequately considered and no, not adequately considered. So in the end, we can really see that there are gaps, and then there is likely a lot of need to really think about what it would look like to centre accessibility within post-secondary. Some institutions that are doing this well talked about using an IDEA framework or EDI instead, engaging with the lived experiences of neurodivergent students, but also neurodivergent staff and faculty and leadership, as well. Creating spaces where people want to share their whole selves and identity and bring about change. Those are opportunities that right now are being lost because of the stigma and the lack of safety to have those sorts of conversations. And then another way that this is being tackled in some institutions is creating new appointments or rules or institutional restructuring to support this work. To make sure that accessibility is in there, it has a seat at the table, as opposed to just sort of being off on the wayside.

So I will just conclude here with five key recommendations, which some of which I've gone over here. But the first is mandatory neurodiversity training for all campus employees for different groups that will look different for faculty than it would look for staff. Then it would look

different for security, food service workers, and individuals who work on residents. But everyone who is engaging with students really does need to have a better understanding of the needs of students and whether that's in the classroom or in crisis. The second is adopting a neuroinclusive and neuro-affirming wrap-around service or hub model. University of Calgary has recently done this, and there is no requirement for documentation to access it. It is self-identification is valid. So there are some institutions doing some really interesting, really innovative work in this space. Integrate accessibility into EDI. I talked about that, so I'll move on quickly. Provide neurodivergent students with information relevant to their learning profile. So that's where students really need opportunities to maybe work with an ADAD, ADHD coach, a study skills coach. Maybe they need a peer mentor. What do they need? Where are they finding challenges? Where are their functional deficits, where is the functional deficit, and what support is best? What would make sense? What is the student willing to try? And the more information they have about their own learning profile, the better they can advocate for their learning. And the last is just creating opportunities for everyone to participate in these conversations. Great. I will pause there.

And again, if anyone's interested in any of that data, I would absolutely love to continue the conversation with you or send reports to you. I'll just sort of. Oh, and someone put it in the chat for me. Thank you. What a wonderful community this is. I'll just look to see if there's any questions. So someone asked: Does the research identify which institutions were surveyed? No, it does not for ethics. This research did undergo full ethics review, and that is absolutely part of the ethics condition that is anonymous participation. So no, you will see where people come from in terms of province and which institution type. So that level data is available.

HELENA: Jennifer, another question there is: What are some characteristics of neuro-affirming spaces?

JENNIFER:

Oh. Absolutely. That's such a great question. Thank you, Helena. So some characteristics, and this is just my thoughts off the top of my head. I think that's a great question to every panelist. But really working from the place that all brains are valuable. All ways of learning are valuable, All ways of communication are valuable and all ways of being in the world are valuable. That is exactly not what is being told, essentially, either implicitly or explicitly to most neurodivergent learners every day. So it needs to start there, and then there's a need for us to really think, well, if we're starting from that point where everyone's ways of being and knowing and learning are valid, then what do we need? And if it's a social group, then it's thinking about, ok, how do we build social connection for this group in this way? If it's learning, ok, where are the pinch points to accessing the accommodations or supports that you need. And it's also just that idea that neurodivergent students are shouldering such a heavy load. We know they have executive function challenges at much higher rates than neurotypical students, but they're the ones expected to fill out all the forms. They're the ones expected a week before every exam to organize it. They're the ones expected to talk to eight different faculty every single year about their accommodations and receive responses anywhere from exceptional and caring to grossly

inappropriate and/or illegal, essentially, like, you know, choosing not to provide accommodation when it is legally required. So that's a really heavy load on students, and neuro-affirming approaches start to recognize that and then work to reduce the load or the barriers for this group.

HELENA: Thank you so much, Jennifer. I see another question in chat, but I'm going to invite you to maybe answer it in the chat, if you don't mind, so that we can make sure to get through all the panelists in a timely manner. And then there will also be time at the very end to ask Jennifer questions again. We're going to move on to our next panelist. And really, Jennifer, you set the stage so well for us, getting this broad picture, and now we're going to move closer to B.C. then to UVic, and I'm right here in Victoria. I want to invite our next panelist, Dr. Megan Ames. She's an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Victoria. Her research focuses on supporting autistic post-secondary students with a focus on peer mentorship models. So, Megan, we really look forward to your presentation. Thank you for being here today.

MEGAN AMES:

Thank you for the lovely introduction, and thank you, Jennifer for leading us off. Yeah, so my name is Megan Ames. I'm assistant professor here in the clinical psychology program at the University of Victoria. And I'm going to be saying just next slide because I am not technologically. It's not a strength for me.

So before I begin, I'd like to acknowledge and respect the Lekwungen people who include those who are Songhees and the Esquimalt Peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands. I am, as you can see, in my office at the University of Victoria, and I wish I cleaned up before this, but I'm sure you'll all ignore that. So I'd like to again, acknowledge the Lekwungen and the Songhees Peoples whose historical relationship with this land continue to this day. I'd also like to acknowledge that I'm going to be presenting on broader research on autism and higher education that I conduct within a team. And so I'm representing our team here. So this includes Dr. Carley McMorris at the University of Calgary, Emily Coombes, who is a wonderful graduate student at the University of Alberta and who I've mentored for many years now, and Dr. Jonathan Vincent at Lancaster University in the UK. So our research also involves graduate students and undergraduate students with neurotypical, neurodivergent, and autistic identities. So I'm going to be highlighting three studies from our team. But I also on my final slide have a link to our website that has further information. Of course, I'm happy to provide my email addresses there too, if you want to connect further. So next slide, please.

Yeah. So we started our work when I was appointed here at UVic. Really from a practical question of, I was having students and parents reach out to me and ask about what supports there are for autistic students at the post-secondary level. And there, to my knowledge, I mean, now there might be more resources, but at the time when we did this search, there really wasn't like a directory about what institutions have autism-specific supports. And so this study here, we mapped all the post-secondary institutions across Canada. And searched their

websites diligently for any autism specific support available at their institutions. And so we did a scan at the time. This was in 2021, and we're set to redo the scan next year. And we searched the websites of 250 publicly funded Canadian post-secondary institutions. That included universities, junior colleges, Cégeps, and technical and vocational institutions. And we identified only 15. So that 6% had at least one specific support for autistic students. And most of these were really just information about autism on their website. On the slide here, you'll notice kind of two what we call hot spots. So two areas within Canada that had more supports than other spots, so in Southern Ontario, but also in here in B.C. And one of the supports identified, we'll be learning more about in the next presentation at SFU and their wonderful mentorship model there. So again, so I have, again, a website that lists all the institutions that have autism-specific supports across Canada. And so I'm happy to share that at the end. So this, we first mapped the autism supports across Canada, and we then were wondering, well, why do some institutions do this really well and some institutions are not able to provide or autism specific supports. Our next survey, which I'll ask for the next slide, please.

Our next study, and probably off to click all of that. I don't. Yeah, there might be animation. Sorry. So then we noticed that most autism services were within what's considered the Centre for Accessibility or similar across post-secondary institutions or housed within those centres. So we interviewed staff and administration in those we call it CAL here at UVic across CAL centres, across Canada to get an understanding of what are the facilitators and barriers to supporting autistic students. And not surprisingly the main barriers noted here are time and money. So having just as Dr. Fane talked about having institutional institutions dedicated to providing neuroinclusive campuses and initiatives, and having dedicated personnel to launch and develop and evaluate these initiatives. Some other comments that came up, that some of the services are quite siloed within post-secondary institutions, which creates barriers about knowledge or what supports are out there. But we did note a real strong desire of accessibility staff and administrators to support autistic students. But again, there are these barriers of time and money being most significant. So folks again, would like to support autistic students, but there wasn't a dedicated personnel or that wasn't within um, their role or didn't have access to supports. The places that did have autism certificate supports and services. Again, there was that administration kind of champions at those locations, or also research champions. So folks doing research in this field, developing and evaluating services like, say, a peer mentorship program. Again, we would like we're going to be updating our scan of Canadian post-secondary institutions because since that first scan, there are a number of institutions, like Dr. Fane mentioned, and my colleague at U of Calgary, where there are now wrap-around services. There are specific neurodivergent advisors at the University of Toronto. They have neurodivergent peer mentors and various social groups as well. So there are institutions where they have a great model for how this can be done well. And then in hot off the press, our team has been involved in mapping the literature. So understanding what research or evidence is available about autism and higher education. Go to the next slide, please.

And just as the number of autistic people attending higher education is on the rise, so is the number of studies and the amount of research being done to support autistic students'

experiences on campuses. And so our team recently engaged in a systematic review of reviews or umbrella review of all the literature since 2000 to understand where is the research pointing and are there gaps in our knowledge on autism and higher education? Of over 2,000 studies included in our review, we identified 26 review papers, and this is a word cloud of the topics of these review papers. So you can see here that there are a majority of the or a large number of review papers that focus on supports and autistic students' experiences, challenges and needs, as well as the transition to post-secondary institutions. And then there's also some other kind of less focused topics on barriers, family. One of the things that we identified as a gap is that, following up on Dr. Fane's discussion, experience of disclosure within post-secondary institutions. So we have some gaps in our knowledge there. Our findings really point to specific ways to strengthen the research being conducted in this field. One of the things that we coded for was also inclusion of autistic voice in the research. And one of our recommendations is the inclusion of autistic voice within the research and developing the research questions and conducting the research itself and creating these publications or these outputs to promote neuro-affirming, validating, and safe spaces, and to conduct research that focuses on inequities faced by autistic students. We also noted that most of these reviews were published within the past five years. Again, it's a burgeoning research field, and most were conducted by American researchers, although there were a number by Canadian and Australian researchers as well. And so next slide, please.

So I want to thank you all for coming to this presentation and I have links to our websites there and my email address if you have further questions.

HELENA: One question there.

MEGAN:

Does transition also include access to career-building experiences? I'd have to review the 26 studies again, but it was mostly transition to some institutions, and again, this is not Canadian specific. Some institutions have transition programs to facilitate students coming from high school into post-secondary. So this could look like particular information or workshop during orientation week or even having high school students visit the institution previously. So that's where that transition support, the research was mainly focused on. Yes. So sorry, I just see the next one from Dr. Fane. So that in the research she had done, transition was broken into transition to higher education and transition to workforce. And this was mainly the transition into post-secondary institutions.

HELENA: Go ahead, Elina.

ELINA:

Hi. Thank you, Megan. It's really nice to finally meet you. Thanks. Yeah. We live not too far from one another, but yeah, we haven't actually formally met. So yeah, I'm really interested in the University of Calgary neurodiversity advisor hub and model that you are talking about. I know you are close colleagues with Carley. Do you have any insights for us? I know that it's been

funded by the Sinneave Foundation. So there's quite a bit of backing there, and it sounds incredible. And I know the financial piece, which we'll talk about next, unfortunately is a huge barrier for really integrated support. So I'm just wondering if you have any insights for how that's working. Is that something we need to be striving for in B.C.?

MEGAN:

Yes. Yeah, it's complicated and we've kind of come up with this in our peer mentorship models, too. So we have a peer mentorship model at U Calgary that Dr. McMorris is running, but mainly funded on small pots of money, but hoping that it gets integrated into the larger neurodiversity initiatives. But I think prior to U Calgary and UT of these wrap-around services that yeah, U Calgary is mainly funded by a foundation, which is amazing. But other institutions don't have potentially access to that. So how can we fund these types of programs and initiatives, I think is a huge barrier. Yeah. And I don't have the answer, unfortunately, to that. But yeah, we saw from our survey different ways that people are funding these types of services, and some are more sustainable over time versus say research dollars, right, that you can only have for a certain amount of time. And then, how do we maintain that?

ELINA: Absolutely. Thank you so much.

HELENA:

I see, we do have a hand up from Greta, who said she could share a little bit about the Calgary model. So Greta we give you a minute or two. GRETA: Yeah, thanks. Hi. My name is Greta Heathcote. I'm the associate director of the Work-Integrated Learning Neurodiverse Students Initiative at U Calgary that's funded by the Sinneave Family Foundation. So I thought I'd just share. There's a couple of different pieces around how the supports work. So the neurodiversity support advising is coordinated through our wellness and accessibility services team. So there's two funded positions that are through that team that do the advising for students. Self-identification is valid. They do not need a medical record to access those services. My team is working on a question about transition to the workplace, and so our focus is on the work-integrated learning so that transition supports for students going into co-op internship placements, and then out into the workforce afterwards. So I would say, we're not like the most coordinated support system yet. But I think what we're finding is that there's a real big need for that community piece for students at peer mentoring. We hear that a lot, and that students are finding the navigational piece of this whole puzzle challenging and having to go to different places. So I suspect that, you know, future thinking for U Calgary, that's something we're going to be paying attention to. So thanks for giving me a moment to share that.

HELENA:

Thank you, Greta. Thank you, Megan, so much for giving us some context there. And we look forward to it. I'm thankful that you've shared also your details in the chat so people can dive a little bit deeper into the great work you're doing. Thank you, Megan. We'll see you at the end again. So our next presentation. You've already seen Dr. Elina just come up there, but our next presentation then will be delivered by a very dynamic duo from SFU, Drs, Elina Birmingham and

Grace Iarocci. And both of them are affiliated with SFU, and we are really excited to hear from the two of you. Thank you.

GRACE IAROCCI:

Thank you. I'll get started. Thank you to everybody for organizing this event. It's really important and helpful. I'm coming to you from the unceded territories of the Kwikwetlem First Nation. I think we'll start with just telling you a little bit about our Autism Mentoring Initiative at SFU. Next slide, please. So when Elina and I worked with the Centre for Accessible Learning to develop this program, we were kind of inspired by what I think was the first Autism Mentoring program at York University. And what we were thinking at the time was that, you know, here are students who are coming from high school where they're highly supported, and then they come to university and it's this huge place with a huge number of students, with many different classes, many different professors. The experience is so different and likely to be very overwhelming for many autistic students. There is that feeling like we need to create something to help support these students in this very different setting. We also know from research that there are a lot of obstacles that make it harder for autistic students to graduate from university, even from anecdotal experiences, students that I know myself personally who are highly intelligent, highly capable, have come into the university with scholarships even, and they drop out after the first year or second year. Not because they're not capable, but because they just can't manage all of the additional challenges of being in a university setting. So many of the problems that we end up seeing that go unaddressed are the executive function type challenges: planning, organizing, keeping track of assignments, getting assignments in. The sensory sensitivities are often also a really big problem that students maybe even aren't aware themselves that create a lot of anxiety. Being in a classroom with lots of noise, the busyness, the movement, the lighting creates anxiety often for students and the feeling of wanting to escape that situation. Um adjusting to change. That's a big one for a lot of autistic students, sorry. Is that new routines, having to change classrooms, having to change professors, TAs, etc., is also a big challenge. Something that we didn't think would be a big problem in post-secondary but actually is: independent living skills. Things like just getting meals together, making sure that students are eating, regularly, drinking regularly, hygiene, taking care of their personal well-being. Those are also challenges that we didn't really factor in, but certainly students that we've worked with have told us that that is a big challenge for them. Social communication difficulties often get in the way because it is often intimidating for students in general to talk to professors, but also to TAs and for autistic students that is an even bigger challenge. Then there are co-occurring mental health issues like anxiety or depression and sometimes even other conditions like eating disorders and so on that we have to be aware of. Next slide, please.

Our Autism Mentoring Initiative at SFU was founded in 2013. It was a collaborative initiative with the Centre for Accessible Learning at SFU and the psychology. I'm part of the Psychology Department, and Elina is part of the education faculty. And so we put our heads together and thought, how can we support students so that they are able to fully benefit from the education at SFU when we know they're very capable, but these other things are getting in the way. And so we designed with the inspiration from York University's Mentoring Program this free

program, one-on-one mentorship for autistic undergraduate students coming into the university, and then we would pair them up with mentors who were either upper level undergraduate or graduate students, More often because these were often volunteers, we paid them a minimal amount to be involved, but mostly volunteering their time and wanting to learn more about neurodiversity. Mostly we had undergraduate students, but there were a few graduate students as well from education or psychology who were involved. We did have a neurodivergent student mentors as well. But of course, those were harder for us to recruit. Next slide, please.

The goals of the Autism Mentoring Initiative were to provide support in a safe space. The students would meet with each other, work this out with their own schedules on a regular basis and try to keep connected and in touch whenever they needed support. And we wanted the mentees to have the ability to access their mentor whenever they needed. However, the mentor's role was not to provide counselling or it was merely a support very much like a kind of student peer or friend would be in the university. Then we wanted them to be able to enhance their academic success by being able to be more grounded and connected to the university. We knew that for the most part, academically, they're capable because they were recruited to the university. The difficulties that they were having were more social or in terms of organization or planning and that thing and not necessarily academic. We didn't provide tutoring or anything specific to improving their grades. But we figured if we can help them with these other areas, they are more likely to stick with their education and more likely to do well academically. We also wanted them to have opportunities for personal growth and independence, both for the mentees and the mentors. They may be getting different things out of this experience, but they're both learning and they're both understanding themselves better and learning more about themselves. We did offer some workshops on managing mental health issues like anxiety, for example. And we wanted them to feel included in the university community. So we would also have social events occasionally, and we would in addition to the program itself, we had research data collection integrated into the Autism Mentoring Initiative because we wanted to really kind of determine, is this program useful? How can we improve it as we go on year after year? We don't want to provide a program that is just available to students, but we are not getting any feedback from them or from the mentors. We wanted to be able to understand how it's working, how well it's working, and how we can improve it. Okay. Next slide. Okay.

So we had mentor training on autism, which would happen the summer before the fall term, where we would have the mentors come together and with either myself or Elina and staff from the Centre for Accessible Learning. And we would tell them a little bit about autism, obviously, there is a lot to know. But this was more of an introduction to understand neurodiversity and autism specifically. Then we would match the mentors and the mentees to make sure that there are some potential for connection. The mentors would tell us what their interests were, the mentees would also tell us what their interests were, and we would try to connect people with similar interests. We would have those weekly meetings with mentors and mentees. Of course, this would vary from diad to diad. Sometimes they would meet every week and other mentees would require fewer meetings. They would work that out on their own, but

we wanted them to keep a regular connection. We would have monthly supervision meetings with the mentors to see how things are going, any challenges that were coming up, we would have, as I mentioned before, social events every semester. These were sometimes a little bit challenging because it was, may have been that students were really busy. We didn't always get a very high rate of participation, depending on the social event. Sometimes we had to think of ways of encouraging students to attend to make it less intimidating. Mentors would submit progress reports each month to the staff at the Centre for Accessible Learning. And then research data was collected throughout both from the mentees and the mentors. Okay. Next slide, please.

ELINA BIRMINGHAM:

Hi everybody. We don't have a lot of time. In fact, we're over, but I'll just go through some results that we've collected. So I might skip ahead actually to the next slide because it can just describe the overall findings. So we were really interested, as Grace mentioned in really determining if this program that we've developed is actually improving outcomes for autistic students who participated. And so we had some measures that I was going to talk about on the previous slide, but what I can tell you is we measured the student adjustment to university. There's a sort of a questionnaire you can administer, and there's norms available based on neurotypical students. And what we found for participants in AMI is that they all, in the beginning, had significantly lower adjustment scores than their neurotypical normed peers. And that's not surprising given all the barriers that Grace mentioned previously. But in the second semester, we showed or we found an increase in social and emotional adjustment as they progress through AMI. We didn't find any significant improvements in academic adjustment, but it was marginally significant. We had a fairly small sample size of 19 participants. So maybe with additional power, we would have found that academic adjustment improved as well. Unfortunately, no significant improvement in GPA. But again, as Grace mentioned, this is not a tutoring program, and we advised mentors not to take that as their role. So it may be that this is just not sufficient for improving academic performance. Next slide, Mm. We also we ran a survey and asked mentees sort of at the end of their program, how, you know, what they liked about it and what areas were satisfactory for them. So everybody was satisfied with joining AMI. They were happy that they decided to participate. Most also wanted to continue for another year, which is really positive. Then we also found positive results around how AMI improved their adjustment to college and helped them develop personal growth and increased independence. There was less of an endorsement of helping socialization and meeting others, and also helping with anxiety was not endorsed very highly, and that's probably because we advise mentors not to take the role of counsellor or therapist. And so that's another area of the university experience that needs to be addressed for neurodivergent students. Okay, next slide, and I promise I'll be done. I'm not going to read these quotes because I don't have time, but just hopefully we can provide the slides, and you can take a look at them. Can I have the next slide?

I just want to say one thing about the sort of implications. So AMI is cost-effective. This is not an expensive program to run. It's a very good investment. And it goes beyond the sort of academic accommodations that are sort of legally mandated at the university level. And CAL actually

approached us in 2013 because they wanted to do more. And that was really exciting because we had that champion. We had that administrative leadership. Unfortunately, because of all the budget restrictions that are across the world, you know, Canada, particularly. We have had to actually pause AMI. There hasn't been a budget to fund the sort of basic costs of it. So we're now working on finding other funding models. So maybe it's going to be research dollars as opposed to central money. And maybe that we have to sort of remodel it entirely, and maybe we don't have a boutique program for now until we can, you know, get some additional funds. So one idea would be to offer neurodiversity training to all the mentorship programs across the university, and there's lots of students who are engaged in those, and they don't have to be registered with CAL. So we have ideas. We're working on it. Happy to take suggestions and thoughts. And the budget for AMI was, well, we only spent about \$2000 a year on the program assistant to help schedule the meetings and centralize all the resources for mentors and get the social events going. It was pretty cheap. So we're really hoping to make a case for this program to SFU to keep it going, and also to find other ways to expand it and make it a little bit more accessible because we don't want it to only be necessarily accessible to people who are registered with CAL for all the reasons that we just discussed in the previous presentations. Yes, unfortunately inclusivity. Yes. People with disabilities are always the people who suffer the most when there are budget cuts. That's the unfortunate reality that we live in. Yes, I will definitely send you. Yeah, we can send a publication link. Wonderful. Thank you so much. Sorry for going over.

HELENA: No worries. Thank you, Elina and Grace. You know, when Megan spoke about the champions at institutions, I think of the two of you then as the SFU champions, and we encourage you to keep fighting for that funding.

Our last presentation today comes from Capilano University. We have Alison Hale and Kathy Moscrip. They are both involved in the Access Programs, and we are looking forward to hearing from you about these programs and how we can learn from them. Thank you.

KATHY MOSCRIP:

Thank you so much. I'm Kathy from Capilano U, and I'm here with my partner, Alison. Behind me is a wall, and Alison is sitting behind that wall, and we tap on it often because we work together very, very closely. We're joining you from our North Vancouver campus of Capilano University. We're located on the unceded territories of the Lil'wat the Musqueam, the Sechelt, the Squamish, and the Tsleil-Waututh Nations. So thank you for inviting us. And I'm going to just introduce the programs. We have two programs in our access department. One is Discover Employability, and it is a pre-employment program. The other one is Education Employment Access, and it's a transition program into typical university courses. They both have tuition and fees, and they're both full-time certificate programs and non-transferable credits. Next slide.

ALISON HALE:

Hi, everyone. Kathy and I had to chat a little before presenting and wanted to really focus on our Education and Employment Access Program, which is a certificate program. And Kathy and I

envisioned this program probably in 2014, and it ran for the first time in 2015 on our North Van campus. Really, the purpose of this program is, Kathy and I were seeing a lot of students that were very capable of entering into first-year programs or courses, but not quite ready yet and not able to take that first step. So we designed this program for those students in mind, and we are a full-time program. We run from September to April. We follow the university calendar. We're a small cohort of 14 students. Our students come from usually, it's high schools on the Lower Mainland. Sometimes Sunshine Coast. We have a student this year who's commuting in from Squamish every morning. Our students have either graduated from high school with a Dogwood diploma or an Evergreen certificate. Our students self-report, needing a transitional program before entering into first year studies. We do not ask for a diagnosis, just a self-report. But we do a very comprehensive intake interview to make sure that we're the right program for the student, and it's a good fit for the cohort. Our program runs, as I mentioned, on the university calendar, so students move from building to building, and we have four instructors in the program. So they're learning from four different styles of instructors. Really a lot of our students are ready for first year, like I said, but not... Are ready academically, I should say, for first year studies, but might not be ready with the expectations of university or some of the executive functioning pieces that they need to be in place prior to entering into those courses. The other unique thing about our program, we're going to talk a little bit about some of the unique things about our program, but one thing that we do have that's just coming up in the spring term is a six week practicum. I noticed in the chat, there's lots of talk about employment, and that practicum is really important for students to have that exposure to the work environment. Also help them understand, is this an area that is an area that they've been interested in, is it something they want to pursue at a post-secondary institution? Next slide.

So some highlights of the program. We have a transition week where the students are with one instructor full time and getting oriented to our campus. So we want to show them the quiet spaces, the social spaces, the library. We have workshops where speakers come into our classroom and talk about their expertise. We want the students participating in campus events, and that's a huge ask. It's intimidating for every student to start their first experience on a university campus, but we're really trying to encourage them to do that. We're teaching throughout our term, we're teaching them about disclosing just beyond the accessibility services here, but just being able to have that self-awareness and confidence to tell someone what they need to do their best. Our outcomes are we want them to have more confidence, we want them to have more independence, we want them to connect socially and through support services. Um executive functioning, I think all the speakers today have talked about that, and we're really teaching to that. Alison mentioned that students move around our campus. That was intentional. We want them to get that confidence of moving buildings, tracking their assignments by paper and on our E-learn platform, communicating with instructors, using office hours, that's new for them too and accessing campus resources. Next slide.

Other highlights and successes from our classroom is that all of the instructors have designed their curriculum from a universal design for learning perspective. So students don't need to ask for accommodations. That conversation happens in the classroom where things are normalized,

and students have access to multiple means for representation for action and expression, and for engagement. So one example of that would be we really try to normalize body breaks. If students need to get up and leave the classroom to self-regulate or just to stand up and listen to part of a lecture that happens and it's normalized from the beginning. So all students have access to that. There's no specific requests for accommodations required. E-portfolios. There was also a recognition that many of our students need to represent themselves in ways that aren't maybe typical or linear. So we have a whole course dedicated to e-portfolios. This is really an opportunity for students to be more dynamic and show their strengths and their abilities. So students, you can see down there, it's very small and it's quite dark. So it's hard to see, but you can see that's one of our students this year who's showcasing a lot of his strengths in the area of jiu-jitsu and music development. So it's a really fun opportunity for them to learn how to be dynamic in presenting themselves to employers and or to prospective programs that they're interested in. At the end of this course, the students actually are partnered with, usually it's instructor on campus in their area of interest. For example, one of our students this year wants to continue into the Early Childhood Education and Care Program. So she'll be meeting with an instructor in that program to showcase her portfolio and get feedback and make a connection with that professional. Next slide, please.

We just want to talk briefly about the practicum component. Some of our students have a lot of work experience and some don't have any. They've been focusing on that Dogwood, so we wanted to include this. Also, many programs in our post-secondary, anyway, require that students might have a formal experience in an area that they're interested in if it's health care or child care. So we want to be able to offer that for them. Um Let's see, they get references when they finish their practicum. Sometimes they get hired if that's an opportunity for them. But really the connection, the skill development, and the being able to talk about it when they're applying for a program. Next slide.

So I'm not going to talk too much about mentoring. We just had a full presentation on it, but this is a really important part of our program. I love mentoring. It's embedded. So it's embedded into our program, and we were lucky. We started our mentoring program with external funding. And then through advocating, it became part of our base funding, so it's a permanent part of our program. So each of our EEA students has a mentor. We hire mentors in August and September and train them, and then they're partnered up with one of our students in our EEA program for the sole purpose of social inclusion and or student success. Again, like the previous presenters, our mentors are not tutors. But what our mentors support with is participation in campus activities, student life. You can see in the pictures there, those are students from last year who were involved in our wellness events that happen every Wednesday here on campus. There was some painting happening and then the therapy dogs were on campus. Mentors will attend events with students. Sometimes we just see them in the cafeteria having coffee. Sometimes groups of mentors get together with their students. The other thing that's been really valuable about our mentoring program is the support and understanding student success. So how we always have our mentors talk to our students about how do they communicate with instructors. How did they use instructors' office hours? How did

they track assignments? How did they use resources on campus, like the Writing Centre, the Math Centre, those types of things. Then finally, our mentors also support our students to experience a first-year class. So the mentors will ask permission from their instructors to bring one of our students to class to have them experience what it's like to attend a first-year class, sometimes more than one, and they have that opportunity to do that. It's in the spring semester with our mentors. Next, I should also say that we've had some success with the mentoring program with hiring previous students. Once our students graduate, and if they continue on at Cap U, and they're a student here, they can come back and be part of our mentoring program and support new students that are coming into our program. Thank you. Sorry, I forgot about that piece.

Before I talk about where our grads go next, we were asked a question on the chat about would a student be eligible to participate in this program if they've attempted first-year courses unsuccessfully? Absolutely. I mean, in a perfect world, we would love to catch them before they have that sense of failure, but absolutely. We often get students referred to us from counselling and from upgrading and different programs. Accessibility. Yes, accessibility too. So, asking about where our students go next. We don't have a lot of stats. We do have some in-house stats from Cap U, that 40% last year of our grads carried on in our institution. It's hard for us to reach out to the community and find out where students are going unless we run into them in the community, and then they're always excited to tell us what they're doing next. But those stats do not include BCIT, UBC, Douglas, those different things. But many of them do apply for upgrading or go into first-year courses. We've had students graduate from early childhood, from accounting, from health care. They might be hired by a practicum host, and we want them to register for sure with employment services. We continue to support them. We don't have the budget to support them, but of course, you're all the same. We want to support students, so we're always trying to be in touch with them. And the next slide, challenges.

How come I get the challenges? I get them too. Okay, the big challenge for us is independence, they've come from high schools, and it depends on the school district and the school itself. But there is a dependence on EAs often, and we don't have EAs in our program. So the students are really, they're thinking maybe or hoping it's going to be a similar support model, and it isn't. We do support. So it is a next step before they go into typical courses, but it's not at the level sometimes that's offered in high school. And parents, too, the parents are shocked to learn that they're not automatically included in every correspondence or every issue with their students. Of course, we include them if there's an issue of safety or, you know, all that stuff. But we're really trying to teach the students to be their own advocates. Of course, they can share with their parents, but the communication is with them. So, case management is another challenge for us. It's really every year, it increases. This is our staff from last year. Mental health support for students is growing, growing. We're doing a lot of referrals to outside agencies. We're liaising with psychologists and behaviourists. And so that is a challenge for us to have the resources and the time to be able to do that. Okay. Next.

ALISON: So I also get challenges, Kathy...

KATHY: No, but you get. Oh, yeah, great.

ALISON:

So an ongoing challenge, I think that we're all only unfortunately too familiar with is funding. We are, as we said, a cohort of 14, and so we will never be generating revenue for the university. It's a philosophical commitment that our dean and our administration make for our program. Because we're a small class size, we're incongruent with the post-secondary funding model of putting as many students in classes as possible. And that requires a lot of advocacy work to continue to advocate for that small class size. But with one instructor and 14 students, it's necessary. Again, we do not have learning support in the classroom, and so that can be an ongoing challenge. Many of our office hours are used to support students with learning. Limited pathways upon graduation, many of our students lament that there's not more programs that are clearly identified as programs that support neurodiverse learners. And so if the student is staying at our institution, we're often liaising with the instructors in that program, trying to pave the way for that student and make sure it's a smooth transition for them. But not a lot of options there. Next slide.

I think a lot of these have been talked about with previous presenters, and I think Jennifer talked in the first presentation a lot about study skills coaches. I think when we talk about educational assistance or generalized learning labs, our students often don't necessarily need the support that a writing centre provides. I mean, yes, they benefit from that, or a math centre. What they need is individualized coaching or support to understand course syllabi, what the instructor is asking for on an assignment, managing timelines, managing assignments. And that is one wish that Kathy and I have for our students as they move from our program into other programs is that there's more data available. We often end up doing that with previous students who come back to ask for support. Another wish is just a recognition of more diverse supports through accessibilities. Many of the instructors that we talk to say they do receive an accommodation letter for the student, but that doesn't help them understand how to support them in the classroom. They understand they might need extra time for exams or note taker, but they don't understand how they work in a group setting. What do they need to be successful? A lot of instructors are wanting more information. More options through accessibility. Specialized counselling support, we've talked a lot about that. Many times there's not enough support available and it's not neuro-affirming. So just more of that great stuff, we're often referring outside of campus for those types of supports for our students. Then, of course, universal design for learning through campus so that other instructors have that understanding of how to design their classrooms and their curriculum for neurodiverse students as they move forward with their post-secondary goals. So I think.

Our next slide is thanking you and also inviting you if you would like to ask questions to just enter them in the chat or unmute. We're happy to answer questions.

KATHY:

I'm seeing some questions here about someone asked about the challenges associated with transitioning out of the wraparound support in high school and that gap. I'm wondering if there are any conversations across secondary and post-secondary to prepare high school students for that transition. I feel we're lucky. We have a really strong relationship with many of the school districts around us. In fact, I'm going to travel up to the Sunshine Coast this spring to meet with teachers. We do a lot of face-to-face meetings and talk about our programs, and, and we talk about the gaps for us. And the great thing is that the high school teachers are curious about the gaps and wanting to fill those gaps. So we're lucky that way.

ALISON:

And also going to add to that, Kathy. There is also a pathways program. So we're also in talks with our school districts. To provide a pathways program that would be for grade 12 students or the students that are doing an extra year, sometimes called grade 13, where it's a transitional approach to having six to eight weeks on campus in that grade 12 or grade 13 year so that they can understand what it's like, and also be exposed to all the programs that are available to them on campus. That is happening and there are some pathway programs in some school districts across the province, not all, but some.

KATHY:

Can I just, Helena, can I just make a comment on budget cuts and classrooms becoming smaller because we have increased student numbers? Our issue, because we have a small cohort and we're really grateful that we have that small cohort, is we're always trying to find the classrooms that help us with our UDL. You know, we want the projectors and the quieter lighting and all that stuff. So that's our challenge. I'm noticing this year that the classrooms are being updated and they're beautiful, but they sometimes don't have all the technology that I would prefer to have when I'm teaching neurodiverse students.

HELENA:

Thank you for that comment, Kathy. Thank you, Alison, Kathy, brought so much heart to your presentation. Really, I appreciated that so much. And there was one more question, but I'm going to bring all the panelists back and we can remove the slide. And we have 6 minutes to open for questions from everyone. We really want to hear from you. There's a question still. It is about the cuts. How can we support engagement if classrooms only hold as many desks as possible and sometimes non-movable chairs, their auditoriums, etc. Are there any suggestions from you?

GRACE:

Maybe I can say a few things. I've done it. It's not comfortable, but I've moved students into groups in the auditorium, finding spaces where they could work on, you know, sometimes we have discussions or we do brief presentations as a small group or It's not comfortable, but you can still disregard those chairs and try to work with the space as best you can to make it more flexible. I know it's not an ideal solution.

ALISON:

We also are known as the picky instructors. So Kathy and I, once classrooms are assigned to our courses, you know, when we're developing our calendar, we're very vocal about what works and what does not work. We advocate for different rooms, we demand different rooms from our institution, and our rationale is, you know, related to the neurodiversity of our learners and the needs that we have as instructors. Yeah. Yeah.

KATHY:

So Helena, I see someone's asking about how is UDL fostered among instructors in your institutions. I'm finding, I think you are too Alison, that it's becoming more mainstream. Remember when it was such a weird idea. And it was an architectural idea at first, wasn't it? Making our curbs smooth for wheelchairs. So I do find that there's a lot of instructors that are embracing it, and we tend to know those instructors. And so when our students are considering carrying on in typical courses, we will sometimes suggest or, you know, have a list of the instructors that we know are really embracing UDL. I think it's going to be more and more common. Our Teaching and Learning Centre promotes it a lot.

ALISON:

Yeah, and they've recently added to our e-learn site for all instructors. There's resources for UDL, so all instructors can access it. It's not universal. It's not you know, of course, it's not across our campus universally, but we did receive some funding as well from the Ministry in one of our priorities, and we ran a project to support instructors with UDL design. So It's happening, but it's not universal.

HELENA:

Thank you, Alison. There's a question in the chat. Is there a way the library could better support some of these programs? Any specific resources we could provide or a better way to have one-on-one support for students? Is there something more we can do to help faculty with the efforts to support students? Thank you for that question.

ALISON:

I love that question. Can I jump in and just say that we have a librarian that is attached to our program, and that librarian comes in during our transition week. The librarian comes in, meets all the students, talks to them about how she can help support them in the library. Then we have our students also attend the library. And so she does a, what is it, Kathy? It's during your transition week.

KATHY:

It's just a walkabout, and it's beyond the traditional library services because like we mentioned before, we want our students to know about the quiet spaces, the social spaces, the help they can get. So it's the whole picture of the library, and then later on in that term, they'll have specific assignments where they use the library. We've got some great librarians here that are really inclusive and interested in our students.

HELENA: Thank you, Kathy. And given the 1 minute, I'm going to, I saw Jennifer, you wanted to respond to that librarian question. So I'm going to let you have the final word. And then if the panelists could look in the chat for, there's another two nice comments and questions. Thank you, Jennifer. Final word.

JENNIFER:

I think there just could be a possibility. And again, this would depend on staffing and capacity and budget and everything. So I just want to recognize that. But I think when we think about having neurodiversity advisors in accessibility and neurodiversity advisors in experiential learning in other places, I think that there could certainly be a very, many compelling reasons to have neurodiversity, you know, advising librarian, support space, a centralized person. I do have to caution, though that's not just some random person being like, you're now the neurodiversity advising like a human. Like, it would need to be someone with exceptional skills and experience and understanding the experiences of neurodivergent students, and ideally perhaps a neurodivergent person librarian themselves, which is what a lot of the neurodiversity advisors and counsellors are. So I just want pin there that I think there's possibilities, but that would be very challenging, and it would need to be the right person because labelling things neuro-affirming or neuroinclusive, and if they're not is more damaging even than not having those supports, because these students, neurodivergent students, are coming to post-secondary with repeated negative learning experiences in the K–12 system. We know that. And then they come and have often repeated negative experiences in post-secondary. So that if we are calling something neuro-affirming, neuro-supportive, neurodiversity, then the staffing and the people they need to be the right people to be in those positions.

HELENA:

Thank you, Jennifer. I want to take a moment to say thank you to all the panelists. Such beautiful conversations today. I always wish we had more time for questions. There seems to be lots of them, too. So I just invite those who are here today to take these conversations into the hallways. Be that champion that Megan spoke about. We will share the recording and the slides with you in the following weeks. I want to again just say thank you to Debbie, still with us for ASL Interpretation and for Kelsey for the behind-the-scenes support. Thank you, everyone. Have a wonderful Tuesday.