

# UCLA Tarjan Center ACCESS Newsletter

Advancing College Capacity for Equitable Student Success

## WELCOME!

*This newsletter aims to provide a convenient and current resource for information related to postsecondary education for students with developmental disabilities, such as autism and intellectual disability. While our primary focus will be on content relevant to the California Community College system, much of the newsletter will have broader applicability.*



## Research Insights: UDL in Higher Education

In a recent study, researchers looked at neurodivergent and neurotypical students enrolled in college-level classes. Students enrolled in a required class in the School of Education that was taught in the first 3 weeks using traditional lecture. The next 5 weeks were taught incorporating universal design for learning (UDL) principles. Although it was a small sample size, **the results indicated that universal design for learning was beneficial for all students.** See the next page for our main takeaways from the study.

For instructors looking for ideas on how to use UDL in their classroom, the UDL classes were taught with the following components:

- pre-lecture multimedia resources, including videos and podcasts representing diverse voices
- 10-min traditional lecture, with connections to prior learning
- scenario-based group activities, with individual reflection and group discussion
- interactive anonymous feedback and gamified quizzes
- application activities, including options for how students created a learning product

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# Research Insights: UDL in Higher Education

Our main takeaways from the research article were:

## **UDL significantly increased student engagement for all students.**

When classes shifted from traditional lectures to UDL instruction, both neurodivergent and neurotypical students demonstrated higher engagement.

## **Neurodivergent students found it hard to focus during traditional lectures.**

Students reported that they found traditional lectures, with slides and extensive verbal explanations, ineffective and unproductive to their learning.

## **Interactive learning was preferred over lectures, but too much interaction could be overwhelming.**

Neurodivergent students valued active learning, but they also sometimes found it hard to express themselves and learn with unstructured or intensive group discussions.

## **Many neurodivergent students preferred anonymous, technology-based participation.**

Students reported feeling more comfortable contributing through digital tools that did not require public speaking or immediate social interaction.



[Durgungoz, F.C. & Durgungoz, A.\(2025\). "Interactive lessons are great, but too much is too much": Hearing out neurodivergent students, Universal Design for Learning and the case for integrating more anonymous technology in higher education. \*Higher Education\*. 1-20.](#)

# DSPS Biennial Survey: Focus on Autism and Intellectual Disability

Across the 2025 DSPS Biennial Survey, 842 students with diagnoses of autism and/or intellectual disability (ID) reported on their experiences. Overall, these students' responses aligned with those of the broader DSPS population. There were a lot of strengths in the data, but also opportunities for growth. We've selected quotes from students and have summarized the data.

## Representative Student Quotes

### Supporting Success

- *"I do not think I would be able to succeed in college without DSPS. I am incredibly thankful for the free services at my college that allow myself and people like me to have a chance to show our skills in classes more equitably."*
- *"All DSPS services that I have received have been extremely helpful in supporting me to achieve my academic pursuits."*
- *The staff and the teachers went above and beyond to help me be successful in my classes. I am a proud graduate of this college."*

### Ongoing Needs

- *"I was diagnosed with autism just a couple of years ago, so I'm still learning what it means for me and how it affects my needs as a student. Right now, I don't fully know what accommodations I need... I wish DSPS offered more guidance."*
- *"It felt like the disability office did not understand my needs. They kept asking how they could accommodate an intellectual disability, when my issues are sensory."*
- *"There needs to be more discussion between the student and SAS about the individual's needs as far as what areas they struggle in and what options are available to help them in those specific areas."*
- *"I dislike that I have to constantly disclose my disability and have to remember days to get in contact with DSPS which aren't available online."*
- *"My first counselor did not explain why I couldn't get the kind of accommodation that would help me... They did not look at the recommended accommodations from my psychologist and seemed to have no interest in helping me get any accommodations that weren't in the default set."*
- *"I believe DSPS should perhaps do more research into neurodiverse student especially autistic students. This would allow this type of student to better thrive without all the stress. I often felt I need[ed] more assistance."*

# DSPS Biennial Survey: Focus on Autism and Intellectual Disability

## Autistic Students & Students with ID

70% agreed that academic accommodations and services helped them reach educational goals

- Provide a “menu” of educational challenges to ensure that students can identify all of their needs in the interactive process
- Build in mid-semester check-ins to confirm accommodations are working and adjust as needed

70% agreed they feel welcomed and valued on campus

- Promote peer mentoring and community building opportunities
- Support disability and neurodiversity cultural centers
- Cohost events with other clubs/organizations on campus

67% agreed they understand their rights and responsibilities as students with disabilities

- Provide short refresher sessions on student rights and processes
- Share simple, plain language guides explaining rights and how to use accommodations

60% agreed that instructors understand disability-related resources and procedures

- Give students communication templates for reaching out to faculty
- Collect quick feedback when accommodation services begin to identify barriers early
- Provide ongoing training for instructors

# Reflections with Moorpark College: An Exclusive Interview



*The UCLA Tarjan Center was joined by Brian Burns and Kelsey Stuart, both instructors at Moorpark College, to talk about teaching neurodivergent students and UDL. Brian is an English instructor, while Kelsey teaches in the Film, TV, Media, and Arts department. Responses have been lightly edited for clarity.*

**Q: How do you structure and approach college level instruction to support different learners, including neurodivergent students?**

**Brian:** *So there are these outcomes we're aiming for, but we can be mindful that there's different ways to get you there. Ultimately, in English, there are going to be essays, but the core concept is to teach them about the writing process. So, I teach different pre-writing exercises, different ways to organize your paper, different directed questions to use. Sometimes I use more graphic, visually inclined approaches. We experiment with different ones, and I tell them explicitly, "look, we're gonna try this one out today. If you like it, keep on doing it. If you didn't like it, okay, then don't do it again." That's an important thing, that reflective piece. Additionally, I teach a few special first-year writing courses that include a 1-hour per week non-credit lab - there's not scheduled curriculum, but it's an open work hour. Often what I'll do is have an assignment they can work on, and I'll be there if they have questions or need support. Or I'll also do mini field trips on our campus during that hour, like going to our ACCESS office or the library. So I think about this class as not just about reading and writing and critical thinking, but also about learning and how to be successful as a college student.*

**Kelsey:** *So I teach journalism, so that's a different skillset and class set up. I brought in a couch so students had different seating options. I would always start the class with a current event game, then I would lecture for no more than 15 minutes before they moved around or did an activity. I'd have students research stories that engaged their interests. Students would have really cool interests that I didn't know anything about and it was cool to find that niche and use that in their writing. There's definitely more wiggle room than there used to be to accommodate different learning styles and mediums - material is online, on Canvas, on Youtube, the videos are captioned. As a mom who went through her master's fully online, I loved captions because I would be watching my lectures while putting a kid to bed. So that's an option I was so thankful for. It hard, I have 70 students in one of my classes. I don't really know how each one learns so I'm just trying to provide all the options I can.*

**Q: How do you structure your assignments and grading from a UDL perspective?**

**Kelsey:** *I'm teaching online now and I do a lot of individualized learning experiences. I give an option for a capstone project or a timed final exam. I have options for extra credit in each module - it just gives different ways to enhance their learning. On quizzes, I let them take them again and use their*

# Reflections with Moorpark College: An Exclusive Interview

notes - notes that they've written and chosen to be relevant. I also accept late work, where I say "if you need an extension, send me an email before its due, let me know what's going on and keep me updated." It shows me that you're thinking about this class and I am always accommodating - life happens to all of us.

**Brian:** I think it's important that we, as instructors, reflect on the purpose of this quiz or test... is it very important that students are able to memorize and reproduce information on the fly? Maybe sometimes the answer is yes, but in my discipline it's usually not. If you forgot a term, it doesn't hurt you to take a moment to look it up again. So for me, quizzes are always open book, open note. Some instructors say that quizzes are a check on learning. But if you fail, then what? It doesn't seem useful to me to say "ok here's your F and move on." If they're not learning, the question is what can we do to encourage that learning? Retaking exams - sure - or thinking of other alternatives to support the student so they can meet the learning outcomes, for some degree of credit.

**Q: How do you handle unexpected or challenging student behaviors in college settings?**

**Brian:** Generally, if there's a matter of disruption, it's usually not from malice. I think all students benefit from a clear set of expectations, and from being part of the conversation. I had a student and I don't know if he was neurodivergent, but it really doesn't matter - we should treat everyone with respect. He became agitated and shouted at some other students who were blocking the exit at the end of class. I emailed him checking in and reminding him about our shared goals from the beginning of the semester to create a classroom community of safety. And he apologized and explained his experience, and I said "well what can we do to mitigate that in the future?" And he came up with some great ideas - like maybe he can sit closer to do the door so he doesn't feel trapped again. That's the kind of thing, where we can give students the opportunity to have a voice about how to go forward, rather than just telling the student they are a problem and to stop.

**Q: What would be your top tip for your younger self or a new instructor starting out?**

**Kelsey:** I would say try to get to know your students early on. In my online classes, I have everyone share their "top ten things about yourself" and I share mine first. They can be silly but also tell a little about who I am. It gives a sense of community but also gives you an understanding of who you have in your class. You learn that you have dual enrollment high schoolers, working moms, athletes, students that have three jobs and are in school. And that changes how you respond to them.

**Brian:** Be vulnerable and willing to show yourself to your students, to share your process and mistakes. I tell my students that everything I know how to do now, I learned by really messing it up the first couple of times. When I was first starting out, I had this vision of what a college teacher is supposed to be: very stern, intimidating, taciturn. But the research shows us that the main thing is coming from an authentic place and making an effort to be helpful - that's always beneficial, regardless of what specific thing you did. So I am very explicit with my students - that I care about them and I want them to be successful, both in my class and in whatever other goals they have.

# Social Justice Series: Disability, Discipline, and Policing on Campus

## Why IDD and the Justice System Matter for Colleges

Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), including autistic adults, are disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system. Research shows that people with IDD face elevated risk during police encounters due to communication differences, sensory needs, and gaps in training and policy. These risks are further compounded for individuals with intersecting marginalized identities, including race. This context is critical for campuses to understand as they respond to student distress, including meltdowns.

## Key findings from the research include:

- Adults with IDD are overrepresented in the criminal justice system as victims, suspects, and incarcerated individuals.
- Between 2013 and 2015, approximately half of people killed by police in the U.S. had a disability.
- Autistic adults are more likely to be stopped and arrested than their non-autistic peers.
- Communication differences increase vulnerability during police interactions, including higher rates of acquiescence and suggestibility.
- Race and disability intersect to heighten risk, particularly for Black autistic individuals.
- Families and autistic adults report fear around police contact, and hesitation to disclose diagnosis due to fear of discrimination or escalation.
- Training and policy gaps persist, with many officers lacking IDD-specific training and roughly one in five agencies lacking a formal IDD policy.

## A three-part series

This series examines how IDD intersects with campus safety, policing, and student support in higher education, with the first installment focusing on **meltdowns**.

# Social Justice Series: Disability, Discipline, and Policing on Campus

»» A meltdown is a nervous system response to “feelings of intense overwhelm, distress, or dysregulation.”

»» It is not a behavioral choice, tantrum, or act of defiance.

During a meltdown, communication, reasoning, and compliance may temporarily shut down. These moments require time, space, and support, not discipline or enforcement. [Read a guide for allies here.](#)

## What A Meltdown Looks Like:


- Limited or no eye contact
- Delayed or absent responses
- Crying, shouting, or vocal distress
- Repetitive movements
- Difficulty following verbal instructions
- Sensory-driven behaviors such as covering ears, rocking, pacing, or attempting to leave

Watch this [video](#) of autistic young adults explaining what a meltdown is like for them.



## What Instructors Can Do in the Moment

Instructors are often the first responders during classroom-based meltdowns. While each situation is unique, several approaches can reduce harm and escalation:

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- **Slow down.** A meltdown cannot be rushed or reasoned away.
  - **Give space.** Avoid crowding or standing over the student.
  - **Limit verbal input.** Speak calmly and minimally.
  - **Avoid physical contact** without clear consent.
  - **Reduce sensory input** (e.g., lower noise, dim lights, ask others to step out).
  - **Dismiss class if needed.** This may be the least disruptive option.
  - **If calling campus police or the BIT team, share your understanding of the student's needs and any context for behavior.** Share the strategies above to prevent unintentional escalation.

Faculty can also proactively support by normalizing breaks and movement, as well as coordinating with disability services when concerns arise.

## Student Stories: Kevin Picard



*Kevin Picard is a neurodivergent student whose academic path has been shaped by resilience and curiosity. After beginning studies at Santa Monica College (SMC), Kevin transferred to UCLA and is now majoring in comparative literature. He joined the UCLA Tarjan Center team in Fall 2025, and has embraced the unique perspectives that neurodiversity brings to campus life. In this piece, Kevin reflects on his experiences working with disability services professionals throughout his academic career.*

Growing up as a neurodivergent individual, my path through the education system was marked by significant obstacles. I did not receive a diagnosis for my learning disability until my senior year of high school, despite showing signs for years. Because I learn differently from others, and did not have the resources or supports for my learning style, I spent years feeling like a perpetual outsider. I dreaded going to school every single morning. I struggled to understand why tasks that seemed simple for my peers were so incredibly complex for me. This led to a deep-seated self-doubt; I felt invisible, inadequate, and incapable. I often believed the false narrative that I simply wasn't trying hard enough. Navigating classes without any accommodations often felt like I had to work ten times as hard as everyone else, leading to a constant cycle of late nights, endless studying, and absolute exhaustion.

Throughout college, I have been supported by the campus student disability services offices. Receiving accommodations now, coupled with the understanding that my brain simply functions differently, has finally given me a sense of grace and confidence. Working with the disability specialists has helped me in so many ways, and has also been challenging at times. I hope that my reflections provide insights to professionals serving students.

***Build trust through reliable scheduling.*** I always appreciated when my disability specialists were able to meet more frequently or set up regular check-ins. Sometimes though, I had specialists who would take a long time to reply or would just say they had no time to meet with me this week. I know that counselors have very busy schedules - and at the same time, this messaging sometimes made me feel abandoned or like I was a burden.

➤ Always communicate on a reasonable timeline regarding your availability. If you are unavailable for a meeting, proactively propose alternative options, a clear timeline for when you will be free, or suggest an alternative facilitator.

## Student Stories: Kevin Picard

**Be thoughtful with language and process.** At times, I've been told that accommodations requests were flat out "rejected," and my only option was to appeal. Sometimes my requests needed to be reviewed by a larger committee - making it feel like a formal evaluative process. At other times, specialists guided me through the decision-making process and help me understand what would be necessary. With this collaborative approach, I was able to secure the documentation needed. In this, disability specialists have the unique opportunity and ability to ensure students feel supported rather than questioned.

- Avoid language and processes that feel like a judgment or evaluation. Try to "come alongside" the student learning to navigate these institutional hurdles or limitations - rather than creating an adversarial process.

**Embed stress reduction, organization, or learning techniques and resources into your interactions with students.** I find transitions between tasks challenging, and the suggestion by my disability specialist of using specific breathing exercises and **binaural beats** has been very useful to me. My disability specialists have also referred me to other helpful resources - for example, executive functioning coaching and comprehensive diagnostic testing.

- Assist each student in creating a personalized toolkit of strategies. Try out different strategies in your sessions with students. Be aware of resources and other services that may be helpful to your students and proactively link them.

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