CHAPTER 8

Supporting the Success of the Neurodivergent Student:

Creating Accessible and Inclusive Library Resources, Services, and Spaces

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Introduction

Liberal arts colleges (LAC) are often valued for their ability to provide inclusive and supportive learning environments due to their relatively small size and low student-to-faculty ratio. Students often benefit from the higher level of interaction with faculty, individualized approach to education, and sense of community found at a LAC (Jaschik, 2016). Students who are neurodiverse may find a LAC to be particularly well-suited to meet their educational and social needs, providing flexibility and

personalized instruction along with the greater opportunity to connect with peers (Elias & White, 2018; Hillier et al., 2020; Viezel et al., 2020). This chapter will explore my work at such a LAC to develop resources and cross-campus collaborations to improve awareness of neurodiversity by campus constituents, and to connect neurodiverse students with sources of campus and community support.

Neurodiversity acknowledges and celebrates differences in brain functioning across individuals. For some, neurodiversity may encompass a neurodevelopmental condition that impacts their functioning, such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disorder (i.e., dyslexia, dyscalculia, etc.), or sensory processing disorder (Brown & Fisher, 2023; Dwyer, 2022). The concept of neurodiversity has more recently been expanded to include mental disorders such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and personality disorders. Thus, those who are neurodivergent may present with a high degree of intersectionality in terms of co-occurring mental health conditions along with other areas of identity that may be potentially marginalized such as gender or sexual identity (Botha & Gillespie-Lynch, 2021).

It has been estimated that 21% of undergraduate and 11% of graduate students in the United States have a disability (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2023). ASD is the fastest-growing developmental disability in the United States, suggesting the potential for increasing numbers of college students with the diagnosis (Baio et al., 2018). Undergraduate students with a disability have been found to report feeling less supported and welcomed on campus in comparison to their non-disabled peers (Soria et al., 2020). Further, research has indicated that students diagnosed with ASD and ADHD are less likely to complete a postsecondary degree (Newman et al., 2011). When considering mental health concerns under the neurodiversity umbrella, the prevalence of college students impacted increased significantly. For instance, an extensive study conducted across 373 campuses from 2013 to 2020 found a 50% increase in college students with a mental health concern and found further that 60% of these students met the criteria for at least one mental disorder (Lipson et al., 2022). Students with mental health disorders often struggle with lower academic performance and degree completion (Auerbach et al., 2016; Eisenberg et al., 2009).

Considering these statistics and given the established connection between academic libraries and student success (Connaway et al., 2017), academic libraries must be prepared to offer relevant resources and services to support and celebrate neurodiverse students. There has been considerable discussion in the information science field about the ways in which academic libraries can be more inclusive and welcoming for neurodiverse students, such as applying universal design principles to instruction, library spaces, and reference interactions (Anderson & Robinson, 2024; Braumberger, 2021; Remy & Seaman, 2014). One area in which academic libraries can play an important role in serving neurodiverse students is through raising awareness, and subsequently reducing stigma

for neurodevelopmental and mental health conditions. Research has demonstrated that success for students with ASD is more likely on campuses more informed about ASD (Anderson, 2018), a task that can be as simple as curating and exhibiting materials about ASD (Remy & Seaman, 2014). A study by Anderson and Robinson (2023) surveying library leaders at LACs likewise reported the need for greater awareness and knowledge about the needs of autistic students. Regardless of the form of neurodiversity experienced, neurodivergent students will benefit from being part of a campus where awareness of neurodiversity is ubiquitous. Being the leader of information access on most campuses, the academic library is the ideal entity to support such initiatives.

Background

Lenoir-Rhyne University (LRU) is a small, private LAC in Hickory, North Carolina with approximately 1,783 undergraduate and 903 graduate students. LRU offers a low student-to-faculty ratio of 13:1. With the main campus located in Hickory, there are two satellite campuses in Asheville, North Carolina and Columbia, South Carolina. I am on the Hickory campus which houses the Carl A. Rudisill Library. Approximately 9% of students at LRU received services for a disability in 2021 to 2022. From 2012 to 2022, LRU documented a 90% increase in the average number of students receiving services for a disability.

Mental Health and Neurodiversity Awareness Collection

As with many universities, LRU pivoted to online instruction in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most people working in higher education were aware the increase in mental health concerns faced by college students nationwide during this unprecedented shift to remote learning (McClure et al., 2023). I began to explore ways in which my background as a mental health professional might inform my role as a librarian in providing resources to students experiencing anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. Simultaneously, I became aware of the growing neurodiversity movement that sought to explore the strengths, as well as the needs, of those who are neurodivergent. The more traditional medical model of disability has focused on neurodiversity from a deficit-based perspective, which emphasizes what is "wrong" with neurodivergent individuals and places responsibility on the individual to seek out a "cure" or other treatment to function in a neurotypical world. In contrast, the social model of disability has formed the basis of the neurodiversity

movement by viewing neurodevelopmental differences as natural occurrences that do not necessarily require treatment. Further, in the social model, the impetus for change is on society itself to address and remove barriers for neurodivergent individuals. This move away from the medical model and toward the social model brought with it the need for a neurotypical society to become more inclusive and responsive to neurodivergent individuals.

My first step to bring attention to neurodiversity and mental health disorders on my campus was to work with the library's dean to suggest building a mental health and neurodiversity awareness collection. The purpose of this collection would be to provide books and other resources on various mental health and neurodevelopmental topics most common to the college population. The items in this collection would offer credible information and support on these topics. Having the library administration's support for this project was essential for obtaining the needed space and funding for the materials. After sharing information with the library's dean about the rising numbers of college students with mental disorders and the neurodiversity movement, as well as about how the library could support this information need in the interest of inclusivity and student success, the request was approved in late 2020. Working with Caryn Sumic, the library specialist for circulation and materials services at Rudisill Library, a prominent space for the collection on the first floor of the library was secured. Procedures were then implemented for cataloging and processing these materials.

The next step to building the collection was to use my knowledge of the literature as a mental health professional to select the initial titles. I reached out to the clinicians at the private practice where I work as a psychologist, Crossroads Counseling Center, to get feedback on recommended titles from those working with young adults and adults with mental and neurodevelopmental disorders. Finally, input was solicited from the staff of LRU's counseling office, Cornerstone Counseling, for recommended titles to add to the collection. Since first establishing the collection, I dedicate time at the beginning of each semester to select two to five titles to add to the collection. At the time of this writing, there

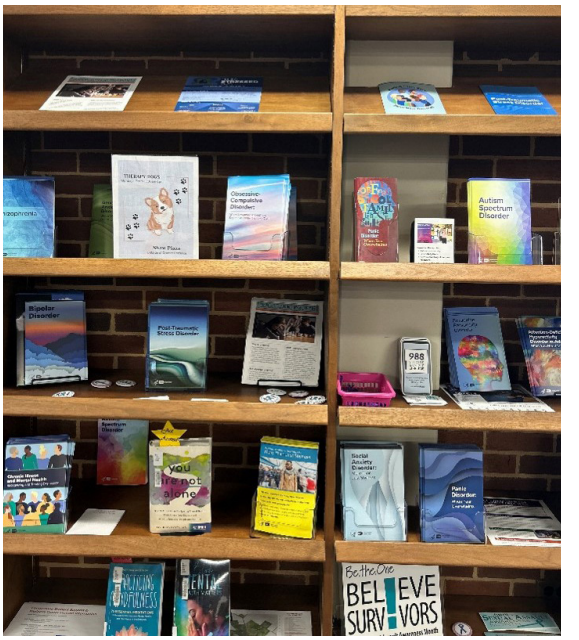

FIGURE 8.1

Wellness Book Collection

are approximately 40 items in the collection. Books in the collection cover such topics as adults with ADHD, healthy attachments and boundaries, self-care, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and ASD to name just a few (see Figure 8.1). While circulation of print materials library wide has decreased significantly over the past several years, the items in the mental health and neurodiversity awareness collection are regularly checked out. From June 2023 to February 2024, the books in this collection averaged at least one check out per month. To further develop the collection, I regularly order brochures and fact sheets on a variety of mental and neurodevelopmental disorders which are provided at no cost and with free shipping from the National Institute of Mental Health and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. These items are frequently depleted and reordered, suggesting a high level of interest in these topics (see Figure 8.2).

FIGURE 8.2

Wellness Brochures and Other Materials

I undertook various efforts to promote the collection across campus. First, I made several posts about the collection on the library's social media platforms Facebook and Instagram. Next, I emailed key faculty and staff in the areas of counseling, student success, and student life to advise them of the availability of the collection with a request to further promote these resources to students whom they felt might find them beneficial. I continue to periodically promote the collection via social media and in one-shot library instruction sessions.

Additional Initiatives

Building upon the successful implementation of the mental health and neurodiversity awareness collection, I began to explore other ways in which the library could take a role in offering resources and support in these areas. These efforts have involved programming, events, resource guides, and training of student library workers.

During the 2021-2022 academic year, I initiated a partnership with the campus counseling office to host a monthly "wellness table" focused on mental wellness. The wellness table was hosted by a student library worker who was a graduate student in LRU's counseling program. Materials from the awareness collection and giveaways, such as self-care kits and stress balls, were highlighted (see Figure 8.3).

FIGURE 8.3

Wellness Table Staffed by Student Library Worker

In the fall of 2022, I coordinated a panel to promote the awareness of mental illness and available resources for support both on campus and in the community entitled, *Mental Health Awareness: Knowing the Signs and Finding Help*. Panelists included me, two campus mental health counselors, a counselor from Crossroads Counseling Center, and the LRU undergraduate program coordinator of Human and Community Services. I created a "Mental Health and Community Resources LibGuide" (https://libguides.lr.edu/mentalhealth) to share via flyers with a QR code at the panel. The

LibGuide provided information on campus resources, crisis intervention, mental health treatment agencies in the area, food banks, national mental health supports, and more. The panel was promoted across campus via flyers and postings to the library's social media platforms. Additionally, librarians shared information about the panel to faculty in their liaison areas to encourage student attendance. Some faculty offered extra credit to students who chose to attend. The library also offered several self-care raffle baskets that were given away via a drawing at the panel.

As part of the library's ongoing commitment to supporting students during times of stress, efforts are made to provide support at times of high need such as midterms and finals. For instance, I have developed a relationship with the Catawba Valley Obedience Society to host therapy dog visits to the library during final exams. The library also provides several low-cost activities during midterms and final exams to help students unwind, such as puzzles, board games, and coloring pages. These events are always promoted via the library social media platforms with the university's marketing social media account being targeted to help with cross promotion. Knowing the comfort of a warm beverage, the library also provides access to hot cocoa and tea throughout the year.

Finally, the library is committed to inclusivity in hiring and supporting the growth of diverse student library workers, referred to as student library assistants (SLAs). The library provides an ideal setting for neurodiverse students to develop key skills in interacting with library visitors at the service desk by providing individualized supervision, flexible hours, and opportunities to practice new skills. Sumic also functions as the SLA supervisor. While not always aware of an SLA's neurodevelopmental or mental health condition, she is careful to avoid overwhelming SLAs by slowly building up hours worked at the service desk and providing frequent, but non-intrusive, check-ins on the SLAs to see if they require a break or assistance. The library has an excellent history of training and retaining SLAs, sometimes from their first year to their completion of a graduate degree. Consistency in work expectations, flexibility in assignment of job duties to best fit the skills and needs of the SLA, and genuine care expressed for the well-being of each SLA are felt to be key elements of the success of the library's SLA program.

Future Plans

Looking ahead, I am excited about several upcoming cross-campus collaborations. I have reached out to, and anticipate working more closely with, student life staff to coordinate events to promote mental health and neurodiversity via campus events involving residence life, learning communities, and fraternity/sorority life. I have also initiated opportunities to collaborate with LRU's coordinator for student success and retention to more specifically recognize and support neurodivergent students through

such efforts as information literacy workshops, personal librarianship, and mentorship. Finally, I have plans to work with staff from the campus counseling office beginning in Fall 2024 to host a monthly book club at the library featuring a title from the mental health and neurodiversity awareness collection. Grant funding may be sought to purchase additional copies of titles to give to book club attendees.

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