

Voices of Diversity
Topic: Students with Disabilities
October 7, 2022

On October 7, 2022, the Office of Undergraduate Education in the Rutgers – New Brunswick School of Arts and Sciences hosted the first of four panels in this year's Voices of Diversity: Rutgers Student Stories series.

The panel and topic for this event were selected by the Voices of Diversity Student Advisory Board, a team of undergraduate students representing the breadth and richness of our beloved Rutgers community. The members of the board span majors, minors, and class years, but are united by a common goal to center student voices so that instructors may learn more about diverse student experiences at Rutgers. The panelists are selected by the board members through an anonymized process, and the panels are not recorded, in order to create a safe space for sharing unique, personal, candid experiences. Over 80 participants were in attendance for this event.

A very special thanks goes to Professor Jenevieve DeLosSantos for all of her work in coordinating these events and advising the Student Advisory board, to Nicole Gangino, Program Coordinator in the Office of Undergraduate Education, and also to this panel's host Lauren Kerton from the Office of the Dean of Students – Student Support. We also acknowledge initial support for the Voices of Diversity program from a Rutgers – New Brunswick Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement (DICE) grant.

We thank our student panelists for their willingness to share their unique, personal perspectives on what it is like to attend Rutgers with a disability – whether visible or invisible. Of course, there are many more stories to be told, and the experiences shared today cannot capture or represent all of them.

Five themes emerged from this event, each of which is poignantly captured by selected student quotes, and each of which reveals key takeaways for instructors and others who can make a difference in students' lives, and for students who live with a disability, either visible or invisible. We share these themes, quotes, and takeaways with you here.

We look forward to you joining us for the next Voices of Diversity.



THEME 1

Even finding a way to just ***be a student*** can be a struggle.

On being a college student with an invisible disability, students shared the deeply personal ways **their disability can impact their learning and engagement**. On **physical obstacles** to participation, students shared the **barriers** they sometimes face in participating or even accessing class. Students also shared **strategies** that can help support their learning and offset moments of overwhelm.



Quotes from our Panelists

- *“A lot of what prevents me from succeeding are things you can’t see. Sometimes it’s difficult to get out of bed or function in class.”*
- *“A lot of times we’re in a war with our mind and our body.”*
- *“We don’t decide when we’re going to have an episode. A lot of times, that can happen in class.”*
- *“The wheelchair ramp hasn’t been working. I’ve already missed two weeks of classes, and I don’t want to. If my wheelchair breaks down, I can’t come to class.”*
- *“A lot of times when an instructor says, ‘Turn to your left...turn to your right’ and talk to someone, I can’t. I’m in a wheelchair. I don’t have that option. If I sit in the front of the class, it’s hard to turn around. There are different levels to feeling excluded or included.”*
- *“I enjoy when modules in Canvas are labeled and they have all the things you have to do and that’s it, because it helps me focus and I know what I need to do. Another course has a bunch of files, but I don’t really know what I need to focus on. When I get overwhelmed, I don’t want to do the task at hand.”*



Takeaways for Instructors

- Acknowledge that disabilities exist, and they affect students in different, very real ways.
- Consider the physical logistics of active learning and the language you are using for inviting students to engage with each other or the material in an activity.
- Take advantage of modules in your Canvas site to organize course materials, since most students do better with clearly defined activities and expectations for each class.

- Open up communication lines. Provide students with the opportunity to communicate their disabilities, since a formal accommodation request might not exist in all cases.
- Consider ways in which you can create an open space to welcome in conversations about disabilities (such as a pre-course survey, or a welcome email inviting students to share their issues, concerns, anxieties, or hopes).



THEME 2

There is a mental toll associated with having a disability.

All five of our panelists expressed the **additional mental energy** they need to expend in relation to their respective disabilities. Students opened up about the **painful stigmas** they face, as well as the **shame and guilt** they feel in asking for accommodations, both inside and outside of the classroom.



Quotes from our Panelists

- *“I struggle to be seen as a disabled person in society.”*
- *“Sometimes I feel ignored in the presence of other people - people not making eye contact or only talking to other people in the group and not the person with the disability.”*
- *“Sometimes I feel like I have to overshare just to be heard.”*
- *“A lot of the issues I face are social stigma. It’s not just the disability accommodations.”*
- *“After I had a serious depressive episode, I felt shame after I emerged.”*
- *“For students living at the intersection of multiple identities, there is so much difficulty in coming forward because there are so many societal barriers to overcome.”*
- *“The biggest problem I face is my own perception of my own illness.”*
- *“There is so much difficulty in coming forward with a disability.”*
- *“I have a block in my head around acknowledging my disability.”*
- *“There is so much stigma around a mood disorder. In movies, we’re perceived as the crazy ones.”*



Takeaways for Instructors

- Recognize that there is much more of a burden to bear beyond the disability itself.
- Acknowledge the student’s struggle and recognize that the way to help them succeed will be an individualistic solution.
- Find ways to show that you are an ally and are ready to help lessen that mental burden.



THEME 3

Behaviors associated with a disability are often misinterpreted.

All of our panelists shared that they fear how others, particularly instructors, will **perceive their disabilities**. Students expressed anxieties around disclosing their disabilities and concern over being perceived as lazy, despite their **genuine desire to succeed, participate, and learn** in ways that work best for them.



Quotes from our Panelists

- *“Professors often take our symptoms and what we’re going through as excuses. A lot of times it’s just me trying to get through the end of the day.”*
- *“We want to be here. We chose to be here. We want to succeed. We want to do the work, but sometimes it is not possible.”*
- *“Sometimes if my brain is at 50% or 70%, I have to be doing something else to pay attention.”*
- *“When I get overwhelmed, sometimes I struggle to do the task at hand.”*
- *“A lot of my stimming is me on auto-pilot.”*
Note: “Stimming” is a term that is sometimes used to refer to the repetition of physical movements or vocalizations, often by individuals with autism or other disabilities.
- *“We already feel that we are not doing enough.”*
- *“How will this be perceived by someone who does not understand my experience?”*



Takeaways for Instructors

- Have an honest conversation with students about how certain behaviors (like doodling or multitasking) may come across in the classroom space while you are teaching. Be ready to be flexible and understanding. Work together to find a way to create space for the student to engage in behaviors that allow them to focus.
- Avoid making generalizations about a student experiences in class or on campus, and do not make assumptions around a student’s attitude to classwork.
- Students might struggle with lectures or activities that run for long periods of time and might need breaks to function effectively.
- Have conversations with students to understand reasons behind regular absences or impacted participation. Work with them to find ways to help them succeed.
- Reflect on how certain phrasing of policies about attendance and deadlines may be perceived as punitive measures and present an obstacle to student success.
- Respect confidentiality in communications about the student’s condition. Work towards building trust.



THEME 4

A little goes a long way.

Our student panelists shared how **valuable representation and acknowledgement** can be in the classroom and expressed that **even a small gesture** like a syllabus statement, a reference to accommodations, or taking a moment to check in with your students can help to make them feel seen and valued.



Quotes from our Panelists

- *“Sometimes I wish I just knew more about what my accommodation options are.”*
- *“Our whole life we’ve heard, ‘The world isn’t going to baby you your whole life.’ We’ve heard it from our family, our friends, our high school teachers.”*
- *“Real world is built on ableism.”*
- *“Something as small as asking students ‘How do you feel today?’ can make someone feel validated.”*



Takeaways for Instructors

- Personalize your message about disabilities to your students. Complement the standard language in your syllabus with a message that helps build connections and creates a safe space.
- Be ready to listen and simply *acknowledge*.
- Consider how your messages could be interpreted from a variety of perspectives.
- Remind students to be considerate with disability accessible spaces.
- Be conscious of non-verbal actions in interactions with students with disabilities. Be aware that some students may be self-conscious about the physical space they take up in class, like a wheelchair, and be mindful to convey that they are welcome and that their presence is not disruptive.
- Be careful not to unintentionally create barriers to student participation when considering non-standard class activities such as holding a class outside, a field trip, etc.
- Think of ways to involve the classroom community by increasing awareness and building a wider network of allies for students with disabilities.



THEME 5

Take care of yourself.

Our student panelists generously offered some **words of advice** for others in a similar position, which we think are valuable and meaningful suggestions for everyone to consider in their own lives.



Takeaways for anyone with a disability (and really, everyone)

- Take care of yourself. Do not put undue pressure on yourself.
- Practice self-compassion.
- Focus on the goal.
- Be conscious of the energy around you because it affects you.
- Be conscious of your surroundings.
- Be your biggest advocate.
- Remember that your well-being comes before any academic priorities or extracurricular priorities.
- Remind yourself that validation comes from within.
- Your issues are valid, and it is okay to ask for help.
- You have nothing to be ashamed of.
- Trust your voice.