

Navigating Higher Education

A Neurodivergent Student's Guide



As a neurodivergent learner, your success at university or college starts with knowing the tips and tricks to help you succeed.

This guide includes key information on how to prepare for higher education as a neurodivergent learner. These tips and tricks are meant to help set you up for success and make your transition easier.

1. Find out about your school's accessibility services

Accessibility services are there for students who need them. They include help with adjusting to your environment, accommodations, and access to additional supports like mental health services, mentorship programs, tutoring, and assistive technology. Check out accessibility services before you start so you know what support is available when you need it.



Tip: Take a campus tour or visit the accessibility services webpage before you start to learn about your school's available services and how to register.

2. Prepare for new communication expectations

You will be expected to communicate effectively with many different teaching faculty, administrative staff, and peers. However, many neurodivergent students we spoke with found communication at college and university challenging because the expectations for student communication are higher than expectations in high school. Challenges neurodivergent students shared with us include:

- explaining their learning needs to each instructor/professor
- requesting support or accommodations before deadlines
- responding to emails
- active participation in class (asking questions, clarifying assignment details)
- group work and building relationships with peers

To build a network of supportive peers, you can explore peer mentorship, social groups, and support groups available at your school. Accessibility advisors can help you with communication strategies for working with instructors/professors and peers during group work.



Tip: Ask a trusted support person or your accessibility advisor if you need help responding to or clarifying written or spoken miscommunications. Creating email templates to streamline communication is a strategy some students find effective.

3. Be informed about the disclosure process

Disclosure means informing your school about a diagnosis (like a learning disability, autism, ADHD, or mental health issue) that affects learning. If you think you would benefit from accommodations, you'll need to decide whether you want to disclose your diagnosis. To receive accommodations, you'll need to disclose and register with accessibility services by providing recent, formal documentation (usually within the past five years). A high school Individual Education Plan (IEP) alone does not guarantee accommodations. If you have or had accommodations in high school, they will need to be adapted to your new learning environment.



Tip: Accessibility services can guide you on the documentation they need. Contact them three to four months before you start if you have questions about the disclosure or registration process, since setting up accommodations takes time.

4. Strengthen executive function and study skills

Neurodivergent students often face greater challenges with executive function skills than their neurotypical peers. This includes skills such as working memory (remembering what you read/hear), attention and focus, starting tasks, organization and planning, and self-regulation, which are all essential for learning.

The faster pace of learning in university and college requires strong executive function skills for day-to-day learning activities such as:

- staying focused during lectures
- keeping up with assigned readings
- completing assignments on time
- allocating time for schoolwork outside of class time
- requesting accommodations before deadlines (for example, submitting a request to write an exam in an alternate location)



Tip: Explore the supports for executive function, assistive technology, and study skills offered at your school to help further develop your skills and create systems to track assignments and due dates.

5. Consider your course load

Managing a full course load each semester can be tough for new students, especially those balancing work, family, and/or health issues. To be considered full-time, you only need to be enrolled at 60 per cent of a full-time course load, or 40 per cent if you have a permanent disability.¹ Accessibility services can guide you on considering course load and program requirements.



Tip: Most schools and programs offer options for course load that still meet full-time requirements. Taking fewer courses at a time may help neurodivergent students keep up with the challenging pace of learning at college and university.

¹ National Student Loan Service Centre, “How to Apply,” Government of Canada, last modified June 5, 2024, <https://www.csnpe-nslsc.canada.ca/en/how-to-apply>.

6. Prepare for experiential learning opportunities

Experiential learning includes real-world opportunities like co-op programs, practicums, work-integrated learning, apprenticeships, and clinical placements. Experiential learning opportunities can be a great way to build valuable employability skills, gain industry experience, and develop a professional network. Workplaces, like schools, are legally required to accommodate people with documented accessibility needs. For students undertaking practicums or clinical placements, professional regulating bodies may also help to determine reasonable accommodations.



Tip: Speak with an accessibility or experiential learning advisor before starting experiential learning opportunities to determine whether you may benefit from having specific accommodations.

Shining a light on neurodiversity in education

Transitioning to post-secondary education can be a challenging period for students. For neurodivergent learners, understanding what to expect and the supports available can enable them to leverage their strengths and succeed. See our other research to learn more about how post-secondary institutions can become more neuroinclusive.

[Making the Invisible Visible: Neurodivergent Students’ Experiences in Canadian Higher Education](#), November 2024

[“Hidden Struggles: Situating Neurodiversity in Post-Secondary Education,”](#) May 2024

[“Neurodiversity,”](#) The Future Skills Podcast, August 2023

[Breaking Down Barriers: Improving the Workplace Experience for Neurodivergent Canadians](#), March 14, 2023

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