Diversity and Inclusion: Touching on Neurodiversity and Neurodivergence

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Neurodiversity refers to the virtually infinite neuro-cognitive variability within Earth's human population. It points to the fact that every human has a unique nervous system with a unique combination of abilities and needs. (Judy Singer, Australian Sociologist).

At the turn of the millennium, advocates began to increasingly fight to recognize neurodiversity. These advocates felt that certain classifications of mental abilities and disabilities given to people oftentimes led to their mistreatment, especially people suffering from disabilities that were stigmatizing. Advocates wanted to help prevent discriminatory practices that were frequently taking place and leading to the lack of advancement in careers and other societal benefits neurotypical individuals receive without further consideration. Recognizing the spectrum of neurodiversity allows inclusivity and recognition of the rights of all people while providing space for neurotypical and neurodiverse strengths in all environments from home to professional, along with school, work, and community settings.

Advocates are pointing out that the differences in neurodiversity are called neurodivergence. Neurodivergence is when a brain learns, behaves, and processes information differently than neurotypical individuals due to environmental factors, genetic factors, or a mix of both. The differences in people that are neurodivergent could be mild to severe; unnoticeable with typical daily living to requiring high-level assistance in everyday activities.

The term neurodivergent used to refer exclusively to people with autism, but over time, it has come to encompass all people that are mentally different from what society considers "neurotypical". This broadening of the term allows all people of all types of neuro-differences to have protected rights and equal opportunities.

Interestingly, there is a large array of examples of neurodivergence. To name just a few with very brief, non-encompassing definitions and examples to demonstrate the wide range of neurodivergence, please see below:

- Hyperlexia-a child's exceptional ability to read at an early age
- ADHD/ADD-difficulty paying attention, staying focused
- Dyscalculia- having difficulties understanding mathematical processes and some math concepts
- Synesthesia-experiencing a sensation using other senses like hearing colors and smelling music
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder-people who are driven to engage in repetitive behaviors
- Personality Disorder-people who have complex difficulties in relationships due to an inflexible pattern of thinking and behavior
- Multiple Sclerosis-damage to nerve fibers causing a signal problem from the brain to the muscles causing numbness, tremors, and tingling sensations; the disease can be progressive

As we work to acquaint ourselves and dive deeper into all facets of diversity and inclusion, we can learn more about neurodiversity. The more we learn about all facets of diversity and inclusion, we can more fully support and champion all people in our programming, communities, and universities.